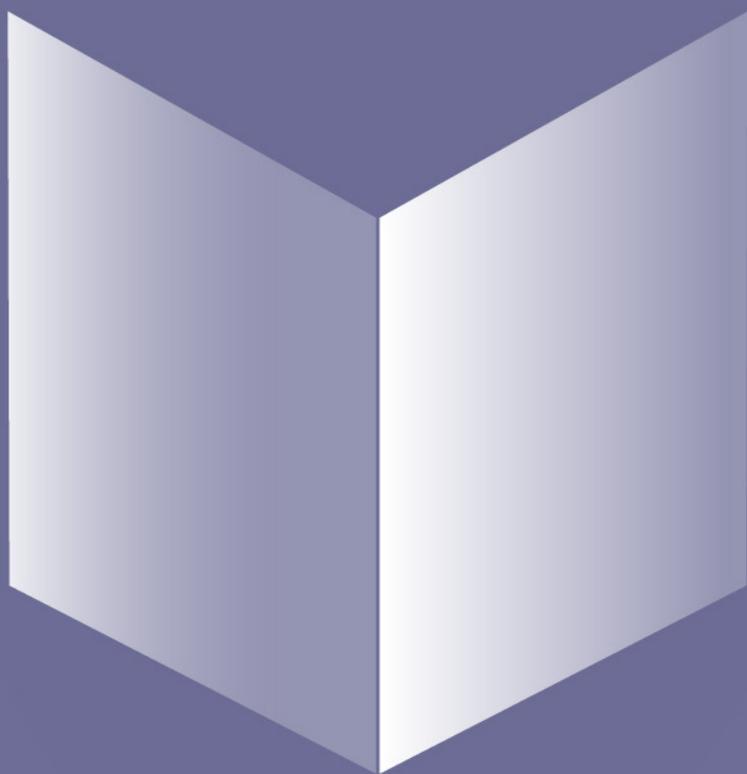


The Infinity Box

A COLLECTION OF SPECULATIVE FICTION



Kate Wilhelm

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THE INFINITY BOX

A Collection of Speculative Fiction

Kate Wilhelm

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A COLLECTION OF SPECULATIVE FICTION

Kate Wilhelm

Introduction

Some of my happiest memories of growing up involve wandering between the stacks at the public library. I evolved a number of systems of selecting books, but the most successful was dividing the eight books (the limit then) between fiction and nonfiction in an orderly way. I picked two nonfiction books each trip, starting with A—anthropology—and working through; one book of short stories, and when they ran out, all too fast, I moved on to plays; and five novels. Again I started with A, and went through the alphabet. When I found an author I particularly liked, I read everything by him or her. If that wasn't enough, I selected by association, and in that way I read all the other Russian writers when I had finished with Tolstoi.

Meanwhile, changes were being made in the library. A new stack was added in one of the back corners to shelve the mysteries. I didn't care; I had my system, and I stuck to it, only now I added a mystery from time to time. Then another stack was tucked away back there, and it was for westerns. I recall the romantic, mythical world of Zane Grey with great affection, and I am glad that when I was twelve he had not yet been categorized, or I might have missed him. A new stack appeared much later—science fiction.

I think with sadness sometimes of the people who now go directly to one of those stacks and take their limit; and of the others who avoid them altogether because they know they don't like those categories.

The problem with labels is that they all too quickly become eroded; they cannot cope with borderline cases at all. The books each label includes and excludes finally distort the label and render it meaningless. Science fiction came to mean almost everything that was not mundane, realistic fiction: aliens, galactic wars, robots, social satires, heroic fantasy.... No matter how expanded the label came to

be, it was not comprehensive enough, and presently a new label was trundled out: speculative fiction. Quite likely most readers have their own ideas about what science fiction is or should be, and speculative fiction seldom fits neatly into the confines of those predetermined boundaries. Moreover, each writer who calls what he does speculative fiction, no doubt has his own definition of what his or her fiction actually is.

Speculative fiction as I define and use it involves the exploration of worlds that probably never will exist, that I don't believe in as real, that I don't expect the reader to accept as real, but that are realistically handled in order to investigate them, because for one reason or another they are the worlds we most dread or yearn for.

Who doesn't want to go back and change the past at certain vital points? Who doesn't want to write the script of his own daily life? In "The Time Piece" and "Man of Letters" I do both. In these two stories, in all my stories, I tried to be as honest as possible and answer What would it *really* be like?

What would it be like to live in the dream world, or the nightmare? What would it be like to be there when the wrong village and the wrong war meet? If you don't believe, you haven't been reading the papers for the past ten years.

The forms of corruption are many and varied; we are very skilled at recognizing it at the national level, but how corruptible is your neighbor, your spouse? You? Power and corruption, a pair of gloves that slide on so easily, that feel warm and comforting, until it is time to remove them. This was the genesis of the title story, "The Infinity Box." What kind of inner resources would a man need to resist a perversion that seemed irresistible and undiscoverable? I kept getting so many disparate images, scenes, actions that demanded to be part of this story that for a time I despaired of ever weaving them together, but then I discovered when I put them side by side, in an order of sorts, the edges of all those pieces seemed to flow together to make a whole. As soon as I knew I had the shape of a story I began to work on it, and no longer worried about too many parts. They were like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that fill an entire table until they are put together.

The paranoia of pregnancy is caused by: (1) glandular secre-

tions; (2) hormonal changes; (3) changes in the metabolism; (4) the presence of another person within one's body; (5) a latent instability; (6) the dehumanization of the patient by modern technology;... (N) Unknown. Choose one and only one, or all, or none. No matter which you chose, you are in good company. It has a ring, doesn't it? The paranoia of pregnancy. This phrase objectified, made concrete, rationalized, became "April Fools' Day Forever."

Some dreamers yearn for a return to an agrarian society, a return to a natural state where there are no polluting factories, where energy is something one's ancestors were obsessed with. I find this both tiresome and alarming, and I wonder if they have realized what the intermediate steps would be like. The breakdown of a civilization is not pretty, cannot be made pretty. If civilization crumbles, my story "The Red Canary" might be a prelude to an accelerating slide down the magic glass mountain.

Can a cataclysmic upheaval result in Utopia? Suppose you know exactly the society you wish to create; you have the methods to achieve it, and absolute control over the children and their education. Isn't this the ideal situation? When I thought about it at length, I knew that when the means are unworthy of the end, the end becomes ashes. Then I wrote "The Funeral."

If one could see into the future, would one be able to take that first step toward it? I mused about this, forgot it, and when it came back to me again, I saw that there wasn't one future, not for the protagonist in my story "Where Have You Been, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?"; but rather several. Perhaps this is why we can see only backward in time.

This is how I work. I don't go out looking for story ideas, but now and then an article, sometimes no more than a phrase, will catch on something in my mind, a rough spot maybe, and it will stay there undergoing metamorphosis; accretions collect, and when the idea surfaces again, there may not be enough for a story, but at that time I always know a story is happening. If it is still more space than content, I try to forget it again, send it back where it can grow undisturbed, gather other bits that have also been examined, however briefly, and put away until later. Sooner or later the idea serves up images, scenes, a character. When that happens, I know I am ready to

work with the material, mold it, add whatever I can to give it depth, other dimensions, actual people. The finished stories are often not realistic in the sense of the materialists—you won't find my worlds in your road atlases—but they are always very real psychically. And the psychic landscape has a more enduring reality than suburbia U.S.A. can ever achieve.

—K. W.

• • •

The Infinity Box

It was a bad day from beginning to end. Late in the afternoon, just when I was ready to light the fuse to blow up the lab, with Lenny in it, Janet called from the hospital.

“Honey, it’s the little Bronson boy. We can’t do anything with him, and he has his mother and father in a panic. He’s sure that we’re trying to electrocute him, and they half believe it. They’re demanding that we take the cast off and remove the suit.”

Lenny sat watching my face. He began to move things out of reach: the glass of pencils, coffee mugs, ashtray....

“Can’t Groppi do anything?” He was the staff psychologist.

“Not this time. He doesn’t really understand the suit either. I think he’s afraid of it. Can you come over here and talk to them?”

“Sure. Sure. We just blew up about five thousand dollars’ worth of equipment with a faulty transformer. Lenny’s quitting again. Some son of a bitch mislaid our order for wafer resisters.... I’ll be over in half an hour.”

“What?” Lenny asked. He looked like a dope, thick build, the biggest pair of hands you’d ever see outside a football field, shoulders that didn’t need padding to look padded. Probably he was one of the best electronics men in the world. He was forty-six, and had brought up three sons alone. He never mentioned their mother and I didn’t know if she was dead, or just gone. He was my partner in the firm of

Laslow and Leonard Electronics.

“The Bronson kid’s scared to death of the suit we put on him yesterday. First time they turned it on, he panicked. I’ll run over and see. Where’s that sleeve?” I rummaged futilely and Lenny moved stolidly toward a cabinet and pulled out the muslin sleeve and small control box. Once in a while he’d smile, but that was the only emotion that I’d ever seen on his face, a quiet smile, usually when something worked against the odds, or when his sons did something exceptionally nice—like get a full paid scholarship to MIT, or Harvard, as the third one had done that fall.

“Go on home after you see the kid,” Lenny said. “I’ll clean up in here and try to run down the wafers.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow.”

Children’s Hospital was fifteen miles away, traffic was light at that time of day, and I made it under the half hour I’d promised. Janet met me in the downstairs foyer.

“Eddie, did you bring the sleeve? I thought maybe if you let Mr. Bronson feel it...”

I held it up and she grinned. Janet, suntanned, with red, sun-streaked hair, freckles, and lean to the point of thinness, was my idea of a beautiful woman. We had been married for twelve years.

“Where are the parents?”

“In Dr. Reisman’s office. They were just upsetting Mike more than he was already.”

“Okay, first Mike. Come on.”

Mike Bronson was eight. Three months ago, the first day of school vacation, he had been run over and killed by a diesel truck. He had been listed DOA; someone had detected an echo of life, but they said he couldn’t survive the night. They operated, and gave him a week, then a month, and six weeks ago they had done more surgery and said probably he’d make it. Crushed spine, crushed pelvis, multiple fractures in both legs. One of the problems was that the boy was eight, and growing. His hormonal system didn’t seem to get the message that he was critically injured, and that things should stop for a year or so, and that meant that his body cast had to be changed frequently and it meant that while his bones grew together again, and lengthened, his muscles would slowly atrophy, and when he was

removed from the cast finally, there'd be a bundle of bones held together by pale skin and not much else.

At Mike's door I motioned for Janet to stay outside. One more white uniform, I thought, he didn't need right now. They had him in a private room, temporarily, I assumed, because of his reaction to the suit. He couldn't move his head, but he heard me come in, and when I got near enough so he could see me, his eyes were wide with fear. He was a good-looking boy with big brown eyes that knew too much of pain and fear.

"You a cub scout?" I asked.

He could talk some, a throaty whisper, when he wanted to. He didn't seem to want to then. I waited a second or two, then said, "You know what a ham radio set is, I suppose. If you could learn the Morse code, I could fix a wire so that you could use the key." I was looking around his bed, as if to see if it could be done, talking to myself. "Put a screen with the code up there, where you could see it. Sort of a learning machine. Work the wire with your tongue at first, until they uncover your hands anyway. Course not everybody wants to talk to Australia or Russia or Brazil or ships at sea. All done with wires, some people are afraid of wires and things like that."

He was watching me intently now, his eyes following my gaze as I studied the space above his head. He was ready to deal in five minutes. "You stop bitching about the suit, and I start on the ham set. Right?" His eyes sparkled at that kind of language and he whispered, "Right."

"Now the parents," I told Janet in the hall. "He's okay."

Bronson was apelike, with great muscular, hairy forearms. I never did say who I was, or why I was there, anything at all. "Hold out your arm," I ordered. He looked from me to Dr. Reisman, who was in a sweat by then. The doctor nodded. I put the sleeve on his arm, then put an inflatable splint on it, inflating it slightly more than was necessary, but I was mad. "Move your fingers," I ordered. He tried. I attached the jack to the sleeve wire and plugged it in, and then I played his arm and hand muscles like a piano. He gaped. "That's what we're doing to your son. If we don't do it, when he comes out of that cast he'll be like a stick doll. His muscles will waste away to nothing. He'll weigh twenty-five pounds, maybe." That was a guess, but it made the

point. “Every time they change the cast, we change the program, so that every muscle in his body will be stimulated under computer control, slightly at first, then stronger and stronger as he gets better.” I started to undo the splint. The air came out with a teakettle hiss. “You wouldn’t dream of telling Dr. Thorne how to operate on your boy. Don’t tell me my business, unless you know it better than I do.”

“But... Did it hurt?” Mrs. Bronson asked.

“No,” Bronson said, flexing his fingers. “It just tingled a little bit. Felt sort of good.”

I removed the sleeve and folded it carefully, and at the door I heard Mrs. Bronson’s whisper, “Who is he?” and Janet’s haughty answer, “That’s Edward Laslow, the inventor of the Laslow Suit.”

Enrico Groppi met me in the corridor. “I just came from Mike’s room. Thanks. Want a drink?” Groppi was an eclectic—he took from here, there, anything that worked he was willing to incorporate into his system.

“That’s an idea.” I followed him to his office, left word for Janet to meet me there, and tried not to think about the possibility that the suit wouldn’t work, that I’d built up false hopes, that Mike would come to hate me and everything I symbolized....

I drove Janet home, leaving her car in the hospital lot overnight. That meant that I’d have to drive her to work in the morning, but it seemed too silly to play follow the leader back the county roads. To get home we took the interstate highway first, then a four-lane state road, then a two-lane county road, then a right turn off onto a dirt road, and that was ours. Sweet Brier Lane. Five one-acre lots, with woods all around, and a hill behind us, and a brook. If any of us prayed at all, it was only that the county engineers wouldn’t discover the existence of Sweet Brier Lane and come in with their bulldozers and road-building equipment and turn us into a real development.

Our house was the third one on the narrow road. First on the left was Bill Glaser, a contractor, nice fellow if you didn’t have to do more than wave and say hi from time to time. Then on the right came the Donlevy house that had been empty for almost three years while Peter Donlevy was engaged in an exchange program with teachers from England. He was at Cambridge, and from the Christmas cards that we got from them, they might never return. Then, again on the

right, our house, set far back behind oak trees that made grass-growing almost impossible. Farther down and across the lane was Earl Klinger's house. He was with the math department of the university. And finally the lane dead-ended at the driveway of Lucas Malek and his wife. He was in his sixties, retired from the insurance business, and to be avoided if possible. An immigrant from East Europe, Hungary or some place like that, he was bored and talked endlessly if encouraged. We were on polite, speaking terms with everyone on the lane, but the Donlevys had been our friends; with them gone, we had drawn inward, and had very little to do with the neighbors. We could have borrowed sugar from any of them, or got a lift to town, or counted on them to call the fire department if our house started to burn down, but there was no close camaraderie there.

It was our fault. If we had wanted friends we certainly could have found them in that small group of talented and intelligent people. But we were busy. Janet with her work at the hospital where she was a physical therapist, and I at my laboratory that was just now after fourteen years starting to show a bit of profit. It could have got out of the red earlier, but Lenny and I both believed in updating the equipment whenever possible, so it had taken time.

It was a warm day, early in September, without a hint yet that summer had had it. I had the windows open, making talk impossible. Janet and I could talk or not. There were still times when we stayed up until morning, just talking, and then again weeks went by with nothing more than the sort of thing that has to take place between husband and wife. No strain either way, nothing but ease lay between us. We had a good thing, and we knew it.

We were both startled, and a little upset, when we saw a moving van and a dilapidated station wagon in the driveway of the Donlevy house.

"They wouldn't come back without letting us know," Janet said.

"Not a chance. Maybe they sold it."

"But without a sign, or any real-estate people coming around?"

"They could have been here day after day without our knowing."

"But not without Ruth Klinger knowing about it. She would have told us."

I drove past the house slowly, craning to see something that

would give a hint. Only the station wagon, with a Connecticut plate. It was an eight-year-old model, in need of a paint job. It didn't look too hopeful.

Every afternoon a woman from a nearby subdivision came to stay with the children and to straighten up generally until we got home. Mrs. Durrell was as mystified as we about the van and the newcomer.

"Haven't seen a sign of anyone poking about over there. Rusty says that they're just moving boxes in, heavy boxes." Rusty, eleven, probably knew exactly how many boxes, and their approximate weight. "The kids are down at the brook watching them unload," Mrs. Durrell went on. "They're hoping for more kids, I guess. Rusty keeps coming up to report, and so far, only one woman, and a lot of boxes." She talked herself out of the kitchen, across the terrace, and down the drive to her car, her voice fading out gradually.

Neither Pete Donlevy nor I had any inclination for gardening, and our yards, separated by the brook, were heavily wooded, so that his house was not visible from ours, but down at the brook there was a clear view between the trees. While Janet changed into shorts and sandals, I wandered down to have a look along with Rusty and Laura. They were both Janet's kids. Redheads, with freckles, and vivid blue-green eyes, skinny arms and legs; sometimes I found myself studying one or the other of them intently for a hint of my genes there, without success. Laura was eight. I spotted her first, sitting on the bridge made of two fallen trees. We had lopped the branches off and the root mass and just left them there. Pete Donlevy and I had worked three weekends on those trees, cutting up the branches for our fireplaces, rolling the two trunks close together to make a foot-bridge. We had consumed approximately ten gallons of beer during those weekends.

"Hi, Dad," Rusty called from above me. I located him high on the right-angled branch of an oak tree. "We have a new neighbor."

I nodded and sat down next to Laura. "Any kids?"

"No. Just a lady so far."

"Young? Old? Fat?"

"Tiny. I don't know if young or old, can't tell. She runs around like young."

“With lots of books,” Rusty said from his better vantage point.

“No furniture?”

“Nope. Just suitcases and a trunk full of clothes, and boxes of books. And cameras, and tripods.”

“And a black-and-white dog,” Laura added.

I tossed bits of bark into the brook and watched them bob and whirl their way downstream. Presently we went back to the house, and later we grilled hamburgers on the terrace, and had watermelon for dessert. I didn’t get a glimpse of the tiny lady.

Sometime during the night I was brought straight up in bed by a wail that was animal-like, thin, high-pitched, inhuman. “Laura!”

Janet was already out of bed; in the pale light from the hall, she was a flash of white gown darting out the doorway. The wail was repeated, and by then I was on my way to Laura’s room too. She was standing in the middle of the floor, her short pajamas white, her eyes wide open, showing mostly white also. Her hands were partially extended before her, fingers widespread, stiff.

“Laura!” Janet said. It was a command, low-voiced, but imperative. The child didn’t move. I put my arm about her shoulders, not wanting to frighten her more than she was by the nightmare. She was rigid and unmoving, as stiff as a catatonic.

“Pull back the sheet,” I told Janet. “I’ll carry her back to bed.” It was like lifting a wooden dummy. No response, no flexibility, no life. My skin crawled, and fear made a sour taste in my mouth. Back in her bed, Laura suddenly sighed, and her eyelids fluttered once or twice, then closed and she was in a normal sleep. I lifted her hand, her wrist was limp, her fingers dangled loosely.

Janet stayed with her for a few minutes, but she didn’t wake up, and finally Janet joined me in the kitchen, where I had poured a glass of milk and was sipping it.

“I never saw anything like that,” Janet said. She was pale, and shaking.

“A nightmare, honey. Too much watermelon, or something. More than likely she won’t remember anything about it. Just as well.”

We didn’t discuss it. There wasn’t anything to say. Who knows anything about nightmares? But I had trouble getting back to sleep again, and when I did, I dreamed off and on the rest of the night,

waking up time after time with the memory of a dream real enough to distort my thinking so that I couldn't know if I was sleeping in bed, or floating somewhere else and dreaming of the bed.

Laura didn't remember any of the dream, but she was fascinated, and wanted to talk about it: what had she been doing when we found her? How had she sounded when she shrieked? And so on. After about five minutes it got to be a bore and I refused to say another word. Mornings were always bad anyway; usually I was the last to leave the house, but that morning I had to drive Janet to work, so we all left at the same time, the kids to catch the school bus at the end of the lane, Janet to go to the hospital, and me to go to the lab eventually. At the end of the lane when I stopped to let the kids hop out, we saw our new neighbor. She was walking a Dalmatian, and she smiled and nodded. But Laura surprised us all by calling out to her, greeting her like a real friend. When I drove away I could see them standing there, the dog sniffing the kids interestedly, the woman and Laura talking.

"Well," was all I could think to say. Laura usually was the shy one, the last to make friends with people, the last to speak to company, the first to break away from a group of strangers.

"She seems all right," Janet said.

"Let's introduce ourselves tonight. Maybe she's someone from around here, someone from school." And I wondered where else Laura could have met her without our meeting her also.

We didn't meet her that day.

I got tied up, and it was after eight when I got home, tired and disgusted by a series of mishaps again at the lab. Janet didn't help by saying that maybe we had too many things going at once for just the two of us to keep track of. Knowing she was right didn't make the comment any easier to take. Lenny and I were jealous of our shop and lab. We didn't want to bring in an outsider, and secretly I knew that I didn't want to be bothered with the kind of bookkeeping that would be involved.

"You can't have it both ways," Janet said. Sometimes she didn't know when to drop it. "Either you remain at the level you were at a couple of years ago, patenting little things every so often, and leave the big jobs to the companies that have the manpower, or else you let

your staff grow along with your ideas.”

I ate warmed-over roast beef without tasting it, and drank two gin-and-tonics. The television sound was bad and that annoyed me, even though it was three rooms away with the doors between closed.

“Did you get started on Mike’s ham set yet?” Janet asked, clearing the table.

“Christ!” I had forgotten. I took my coffee and headed for the basement. “I’ll get at it. I’ve got what I need. Don’t wait up. If I don’t do it tonight, I won’t get to it for days.” I had suits being tested at three different hospitals, Mike’s, one at a geriatric clinic where an eighty-year-old man was recovering from a broken hip, and one in a veterans’ hospital where a young man in a coma was guinea pig. I was certain the suit would be more effective than the daily massage that such patients usually received, when there was sufficient help to administer such massage to begin with. The suits were experimental and needed constant checking, the programs needed constant supervision for this first application. And it was my baby. So I worked that night on the slides for Mike Bronson, and it was nearly two when I returned to the kitchen, keyed up and tense from too much coffee and too many cigarettes.

I wandered outside and walked for several minutes back through the woods, ending up at the bridge, staring at the Donlevy house where there was a light on in Pete Donlevy’s study. I wondered again about the little woman who had moved in, wondered if others had joined her, or if they would join her. It didn’t seem practical for one woman to rent such a big house. I was leaning against the same tree that Rusty had perched in watching the unloading of boxes. I wasn’t thinking of anything in particular, images were flitting through my mind, snaps, scraps of talk, bits and pieces of unfinished projects, disconnected words. I must have closed my eyes. It was dark under the giant oak and there was nothing to see anyway, except the light in Pete’s study, and that was only a small oblong of yellow.

The meandering thoughts kept passing by my mind’s eye, but very clearly there was also Pete’s study. I was there, looking over the bookshelves, wishing I dared remove his books in order to put my own away neatly. Thinking of Laura and her nightmare. Wondering where Caesar was, had I left the basement light on, going to the door

to whistle, imagining Janet asleep with her arm up over her head, if I slept like that my hands would go to sleep, whistling again for Caesar. A ware of the dog, although he was across the yard staring intently up a tree bole where a possum clung motionlessly. Everything a jumble, the bookshelves, the basement workshop, Janet, Caesar, driving down from Connecticut, pawing through drawers in the lab shop, looking for the sleeve controls, dots and dashes on slides...

I whistled once more and stepped down the first of the three steps to the yard, and fell...

Falling forever, ice cold, tumbling over and over, with the knowledge that the fall would never end, would never change, stretching out for something, anything to grasp, to stop the tumbling. Nothing. Then a scream, and opening my eyes, or finding my eyes open. The light was no longer on.

Who screamed?

Everything was quiet, the gentle sound of the water on rocks, a rustling of a small creature in the grasses at the edge of the brook, an owl far back on the hill. There was a September chill in the air suddenly and I was shivering as I hurried back to my house.

I knew that I hadn't fallen asleep. Even if I had dozed momentarily, I couldn't have been so deeply asleep that I could have had a nightmare. Like Laura's, I thought, and froze. Is that what she had dreamed? Falling forever? There had been no time. During the fall I knew that I had been doing it for an eternity, that I would continue to fall for all the time to come.

Janet's body was warm as she snuggled up to me, and I clung to her almost like a child, grateful for this long-limbed, practical woman.

End of sample pages.

Visit www.infinityboxpress.com to find more titles by Kate Wilhelm.

Kate Wilhelm Biography



Kate Wilhelm's first short story, "The Pint-Sized Genie" was published in *Fantastic Stories* in 1956. Her first novel, *More Bitter Than Death*, a mystery, was published in 1963. Over the span of her career, her writing has crossed over the genres of science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy and magical realism, psychological suspense, mimetic, comic, family sagas, a multimedia stage production, and radio plays. She has recently returned to writing mysteries with her Barbara Holloway and the Charlie Meiklejohn and Constance Leidl Mysteries novels. Her works have been adapted for television, theater, and movies in the United States, England, and Germany. Wilhelm's novels and stories have been translated to more than a dozen languages. She has contributed to *Redbook*, *Quark*, *Orbit*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Locus*, *Amazing*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Ellery Queen's Mysteries*, *Fantastic Stories*, *Omni* and many others.

Kate and her husband, Damon Knight (1922-2002), also provided invaluable assistance to numerous other writers over the years. Their teaching careers covered a span of several decades, and hundreds of students, many of whom are famous names in the field today. Kate and Damon helped to establish the Clarion Writer's Workshop and the Milford Writer's Conference. They have lectured together at universities in North and South America and Asia. They have been the guests of honor and panelists at numerous conventions around the world. Kate continues to host monthly workshops, as well as teach at

other events. She is an avid supporter of local libraries.

Kate Wilhelm lives in Eugene, Oregon.