



Novelist Christopher Rowley spins far-flung tales of pocket universes & parasitic invasions.

By ROLF W. MAURER

Writers often have ironic beginnings, and Christopher Rowley's is no exception. Born in Massachusetts in 1948 to an American mother and a British father, the author of such genre novels as *The Black Ship* and *A Sword for a Dragon* was raised and educated in Long Island, England and Canada. He originally set his sights on the study of economics as a career. "This was, of course, very dull, so I began writing for underground papers in the '60s and '70s, like *The International Times*, while living in London. When that market dried up, I took up freelance journalism, at the same time submitting my first attempts at science fiction—two short stories—to *New Worlds* [a British anthology], but with no success."

Taking advantage of his dual citizenship, Rowley returned to the United States in 1977 for the first time since age 12, taking up residence in New York City's East Village. It was the ideal setting to concentrate on more lengthy fiction. Yet, all around, vestiges of the past persisted, like ghosts from some half-forgotten war. "I remember seeing graffiti sprayed on walls by some gang called the 'Avenue D Terror Boys,' which I'm glad I never had the opportunity to run into." An awareness and respect for the past permeates his first novel, *The War for Eternity*, which recounts the struggles of human colonists on the planet Fenrille to master the social and economic impact of Optimol, a drug by-product derived from the secretions of a native insect that enhances the human lifespan.

Complicating the conflict between factions of the Fundan Clan and its corresponding native allies, the ursine Fein, is Fenrille's hazardous ecosystem, and the incorporeal superbeing

that conceived and oversees it. According to Rowley, "The point of the Arizel deity is to emphasize that there are mysteries that we cannot readily understand and could destroy us if we mess around with the world."

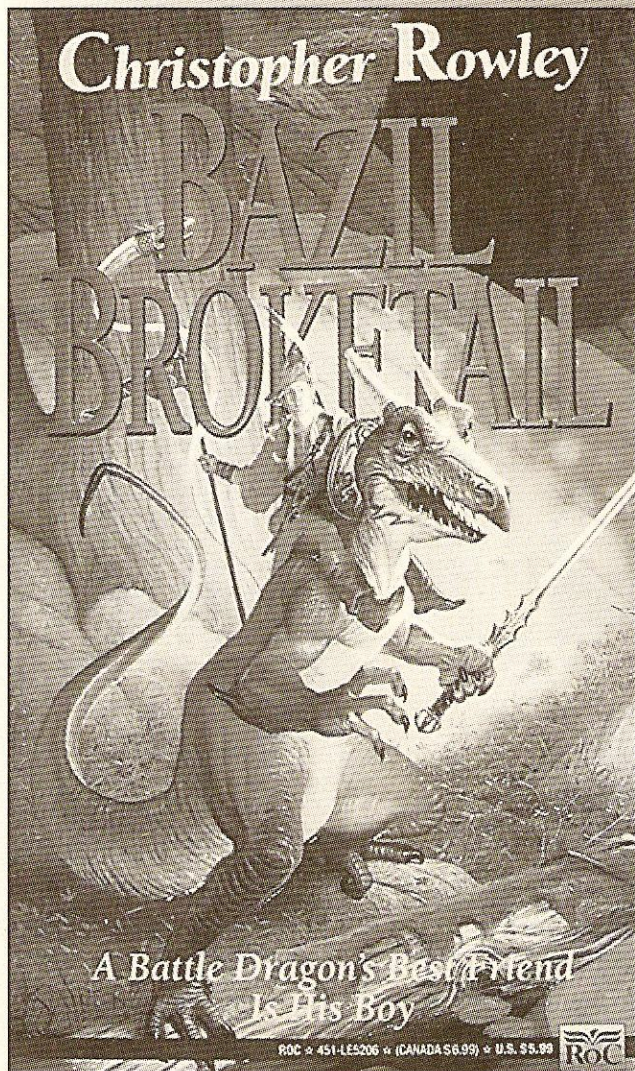
The arthropodal origin of Optimol further drives home Rowley's concern about how contemporary industrial encroachment is irreversibly destroying the under-appreciated biological richness Earth's flora and fauna have to offer. "By converting the rain forests in the Amazon into grazing lands for the beef industry, we're wasting a literal treasure trove of potential biochemical magic bullets that could cure cancers, improve memory and who knows what else. Claims that whatever is lost can be duplicated in laboratories only makes my blood boil."

What sets the forests of Fenrille apart from those of Earth are their ability to fight

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When *Del Rey* editor Lester del Rey expressed a distaste for dragons, Rowley sold *Basil Broketail* to Roc Books.

BATTLEMASTER



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back with a ferocity that would humble Smokey the Bear. "I've always been fond of monsters in science fiction, and this was a good opportunity to use one," Rowley enthuses, referring to the gargantuan, mantislike woodwose, Fenrille's first line of ecological defense that attacks anything harming Fenrille's awesome trees, the trunks from which the creatures are hatched.

So detailed and convincing was *War for Eternity* that it garnered a warm reception both at Del Rey Books, the first publisher it was submitted to, and at Balticon '84, where Rowley received the Compton Crook/Stephen Tall Memorial Award for best first novel of 1983.

Eternal Wars

An intricate example of world-building in the tradition of Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Alan Dean Foster's *Midworld*, *War for Eternity*, along with its sequel, *The Black Ship*, evolved from Rowley's early exposure to the work of such genre staples as Eric Frank Russell, A.E. van Vogt, Andre Norton and, particularly, Jack Vance, Rowley's favorite among American SF writers. "Vance hit his peak in the '60s with yarns like the *Planet of Adventure* series, but he always had a knack for pulling out the science in a story just long enough to further the plot, then returning it to the background so it wouldn't overwhelm things."

In his own writing, Rowley prefers to "show" rather than "tell," so that the reader can see and feel the function of hardware without poring through ponderous exposition. The disappearance of whole cubic miles of soil preceding each use of a sun-destroying super-weapon suggests, with dramatic simplicity, the matter-to-energy conversion process underlying the device's operation; newly-landed refugees from an oppressed Earth settle into housing built of materials manufactured by "puffcreters," automated, beachcombing, steamroller-like machines that form air-filled concrete blocks from sand.

The influence of such writers as Isaac Asimov and Larry Niven also came into play with the 1986 publication of *Starhammer*, set in an altogether different milieu. "I've always been drawn to the grandiose in science fiction," Rowley says, "like the *Foundation* or *Known Space* series," where tales are played out against a transgalactic backdrop. Emphasizing action over science, Rowley's third novel recounts a planet-hopping quest for the near-mythic titular artifact that promises freedom for humanity from the tyranny of the alien Laowon Empire.

"While I doubt we'll come in contact with anything like the Laowon—indeed, sometimes I wonder if we'll make it out of the solar system at all!—it would be especially dangerous for us if our civilization is found as it is today—in a divided, anarchic state," Rowley remarks.

The stage is set for such a disaster when impetuous engineers on a remote outpost,

For Rowley, writing fantasy is easier. After all, you're writing in a universe you created, under non-scientific rules you established.

despite heated protest from the rest of Earth's disparate colonies, test man's only prototype faster-than-light spacecraft, in the process encountering a hostile spacefaring species supported by a far broader application of the same drive.

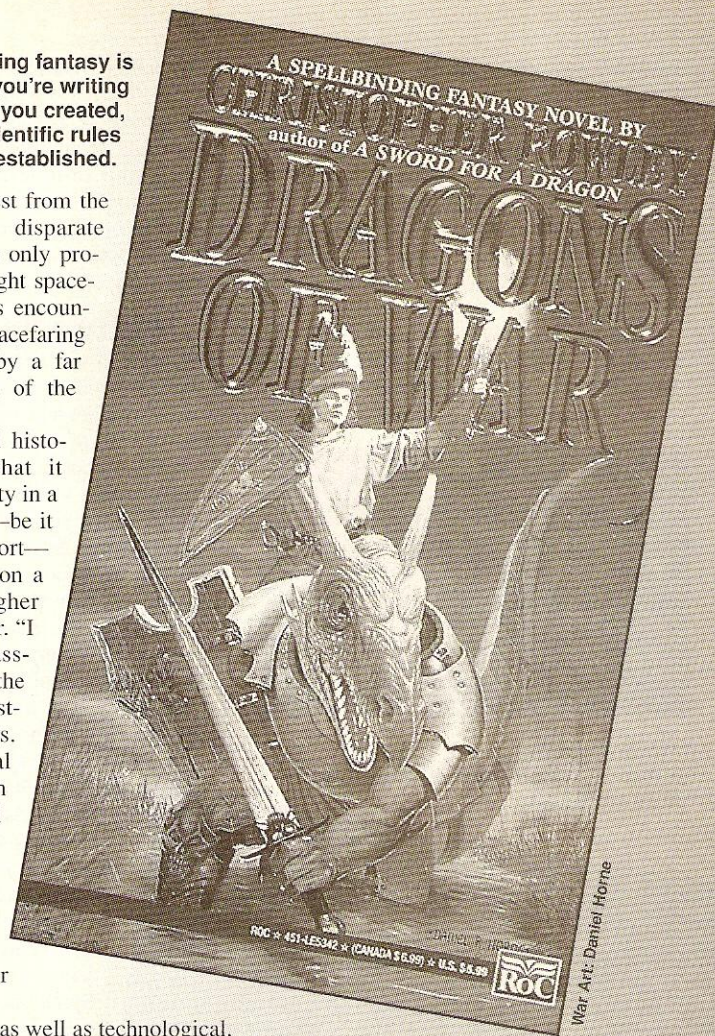
Similarly, world history demonstrates that it only takes superiority in a single crucial area—be it weaponry or transport—to put one culture on a devastatingly higher footing than another. "I was born in Massachusetts, a part of the world filled with first-contact hardships. While the local Indian population was sparse, and still in a semi-hunter/gatherer state, the European settlers pushed them out with only their rifles and their metal plows."

But the societal, as well as technological, maturity to deal effectively with other civilizations must also be addressed: "Certainly there has been work done with primates to assess their intellectual capacities, but this sort of research is pushing a nerve in society,

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and is consequently underfunded. People don't like to entertain the existence of other intelligences besides our own because too much is invested in a world view that says we have the right to do with the planet as we wish, without competition."

Interstellar distances being as vast as they are, *Golden Sunlands* explores the possibility of a territory that's not merely remote, but unreachable at any speed, because it exists in an altogether separate, artificially created continuum. "I had read Dr. Alan Guth [a pioneering theorist in the field of inflationary cosmology], who said that during the first few seconds of the universe's existence, the step from a beach ball-sized 'proto-universe' to its full-sized form was only a matter of generating energy from the annihilation of 30 to 40 kilos of matter. So, I figured, 'What



if there was a decadent, ancient race that decided to retreat into a miniature universe to be safe from alien predation?'"

The novel's title refers to just one of hundreds of disk-shaped worlds pasted against the inside surface of the Plowl, a gravity bubble light-years across, which has become more of a prison than a haven for its creators because they've given over so much control to machines that have long since run amok. Trapped by the one thing that can kill them, the inhabitants no longer enjoy isolation, since the machines have taken to kidnapping beings from outside of the Plowl. A group of humans from the Old West-styled frontier world Calabel must survive in a fish-out-of-water adventure reminiscent of the swash-buckling opulence of Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* comic strip. "It was intended to be something lighter than the books in the other two series, although unfortunately it proved a bit of a disaster," says Rowley of the novel's poor sales, which scuttled the trilogy.

Taking place 1,000 years after the events of Rowley's third book, *The Vang: The Military Form* reveals just what horrible threat drove an otherwise gentle species to originate the star-destroying *Starhammer* weapon, when a family of space salvagers

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recover a pumpkin-shaped capsule dating back to that ancient, pre-Laowon conflict. In short order, the centipede-like creature found within takes control of the entire crew, save for a teenage girl, who barely escapes to the colony world Saskatch. There, the Vang swiftly assumes control of transportation, utilities and a mostly unwary populace, while vying politicians and officials bicker over what action to take.

"For me, *The Military Form*—along with its sequel, *The Vang: The Battlemaster*—represents the worst-case scenario of first contact," says Rowley, inspired by tales of

19th-century nautical terror penned by William Hope Hodgson. "I was trying to evoke the same mysterious flavor of those stories, about unknown things found in derelict ships drifting in the Sargasso Sea. The Cosmos is [some 15 to 20 billion years old], and there may have been many cultures that were born and died before us, leaving behind some nasty surprises."

Future Imagineer

Implicit in the archeological nightmares of the *Vang* books is not just the mistake of failing to respect that staggering age, but the consequences of repeating the same tragic oversight in a cosmically brief span of time. In *Battlemaster*, where the Vang's origins are revealed, events unfold 2,000 years after the devastation on Saskatch. Yet with three millennia separating *Starhammer* and *Battlemaster*, human civilization has grown increasingly multi-layered and fractured: "I take the Sam Delany view of society in the future," Rowley explains. "Things will be as they are today, only more complex."

As to the prime impetus for social change, Rowley sees nothing more inspiring than a state of emergency: "Crisis is what it's about in history—this is what motivates us between plateaus of complacency."

And it is Earth's ultimate environmental crisis that engenders the coming of the Social Synthesis, a globe-engulfing, technologically backed communist power structure the ancestors of the Fundan Clan flee to colonize Fenrille in 1989's flashback novel, *The Founder*. "Imagine Stalinism supported by computers and television. Had those technologies existed in the dictator's time, Stalinism might never have gone away."

For the insight it offers on the Synthesis, and other reasons, the author sees only moderate justification for this first prequel to *War for Eternity*. "Normally, I don't care much for writing backstory since, in most cases, it is really unnecessary; but with *The Founder* it was more of a joint effort between myself and the publisher" to flesh

out the origins of the Fundan clan and how they got to Fenrille.

On the other hand, its follow-up, *To a Highland Nation*, came about solely through

Del Rey's encouragement, to round out a popular line and enhance its marketability in a category that has become increasingly series-crazed.

Firmly insisting that no more Fenrille or Vang books are planned, Rowley laments the profit-motivated concessions a writer must make to continue to publish today: "When I wrote *Eternity*, it was accepted—admittedly, after several years of waiting—as an unsolicited manuscript. Today, there are fewer opportunities for first-time submissions without agent representation, because bottom-line concerns are making publishers less willing to take risks. The sales force has too much say in what should be acquired and encouraged, robbing the field of its unique alternative nature."

Unfortunately, this exclusive devotion to commercial material is sometimes shared by readers. "I find it a real shame coming across young people at conventions who won't give *anything* new or unfamiliar a chance unless it's connected with a genre TV show. I have nothing against programs like the various *Star Trek* series; they're fine for the medium they work in. But, really, they represent a *limited* facet of all the ideas offered by SF literature as a whole."

Market considerations inspired Rowley's latest speculative saga, a series of fantasy adventures about the jockey-and-horse relationship of a boy warrior and his fighting dragon. "I'm writing fantasy now because that's what sells," he admits. "I had originally pitched the concept to Lester del Rey, but he didn't care for dragons that couldn't belch fire, so I submitted *Bazil Broketail* to Roc. It has been followed by *A Sword for a Dragon*, and the recent *Dragons of War*." Rowley finds the fantasy form an interesting change of pace from his customary exercises in scientific and social extrapolation. "It's easier, as far as working within a set of rules goes, since you develop them yourself instead of relying on the latest research findings for plot feasibility—which can become out of date by the time your work sees print."

While worries over technical obsolescence don't really apply in a mock-medieval setting where supernatural forces hold sway, "you do have to exercise discipline in the powers you bestow on your characters. A wizard can't be so all-knowing or all-powerful that there are no challenges to make the character interesting."

"In the universe of *Bazil Broketail*, magic is a skill that takes a great deal of dedication and concentration to master, like any art or athletic pursuit, so characters suffer failures in performing it."

Despite the creative diversion of writing fantasy, Christopher Rowley looks forward to eventually returning to science fiction. "I've done the big-canvas, far-flung type of yarns, and am pretty happy with that body of work. But, in the future, I want to explore more immediate, near-future scenarios involving Earth. The priority, as always, goes to writing and little else."

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