



Strange Wine

Harlan Ellison

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From Harlan Ellison, whom The Washington Post regards as a "lyric poet, satirist, explorer of odd psychological corners, and purveyor of pure horror and black comedy," comes Strange Wine.

Discover among these tales the spirits of executed Nazi war criminals who walk Manhattan streets; the damned soul of a murderess escaped from Hell; gremlins writing the fantasies of a gone-dry writer; and the exquisite Dr. D'arque Angel, who deals her patients doses of death...

Strange Wine Details

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From Reader Review Strange Wine for online ebook

Natalie says

Crusty old bastard (and still longtime favorite) Harlan Ellison takes some pretty cruel potshots at copy editors ("literary vampires") no fewer than five times in his introductions to the fifteen stories in *Strange Wine*. I caught several errors in his writing that any copy editor worth her *Chicago Manual* would have immediately stricken, including my personal pet hatred, "It didn't phase me." It's FAZE, dammit! Take *that*, Harlan!

Brady says

There's a lot you can tell about an author by looking at the shape of his or her words. Ellison's writing is a mad collage of words, symbols, numbers, names and titles - not to mention little quotes, subheadings, stage directions, bullet points, and every other form of literary embellishment the mind has yet drilled.

Ellison's writing style is as patchwork as it appears: he grabs every writing technique he thinks he can use to get the story from his head to the readers'. Which is just how I like my writing; Harlan is one of the few people who can write two-page paragraphs and still insure that you never skip a word.

'Strange Wine' is a heady brew, and I wouldn't suggest reading more than one short story at a time. I also can't review the book as a whole, but I can give mini-feedback to every story in here (there are thirteen).

For some of these, I just say 'Pass,' meaning that this stories is good and worth reading, but it isn't any better than what you can find in the ordinary literary magazine. If a short story has been anthologized I hold it to a high standard, because it has been granted a coveted position above the galaxy of perfectly-good stories that never see bookshops, and there'd better be a damn good reason it gets that position.

At Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs! The opening essay has nothing to do with anything, but it has plenty of food for thought, and it's more reasons to never watch television (a device I've been incompletely abstaining from ever since seeing *Network*). As Harlan explains it, TV killed the dinosaurs (or at least, it'll kill us the same way the dinosaurs were killed). It's funny, sobering, and an excellent beginning to the compendium.

Croatoan Wow. This story treads on some toes. And it was brave of Harlan to put this story *first*. It's about a man who journeys into the sewers in search of his girlfriend's aborted fetus - which sounds sensationalist, but Harlan speaks to wider themes than *Roe v. Wade* here and his description of the sewers and their inhabitants is breathtaking. Probably the best story in the book.

Working with the Little People Funny commentary on creativity, legends, and what passes for fantasy these days.

Killing Bernstein Here's real evidence of Harlan's ADD. About forty-one ideas get explored in this fifteen-page story, and it all gets tied together with the most ridiculous 50's sci-fi twist ending (Harlan's favorite way to end a story - Stephen King's a big fan of Ellison, which explains a lot). A writer friend of mine once said that you have to watch for when your stories get "too many themes." Beef broth. You can have as many

themes to a story as you want as long as you keep them under your control, and this story is the case in point.

Mom Pretty funny.

In Fear of K Pass.

Hitler Painted Roses The story doesn't have anything to do with the title, and it's underwhelming given the genius premise (damned soul of a murderess escapes from Hell). But whenever an author writes about reputation affecting reality, I'm caught.

The Wine has Been Left Open Too Long and the Memory Has Gone Flat Very (very) good imagery, and I love watching nihilism in the face of beauty. It's hard to write a story about a symphony but Harlan did it.

From A to Z, the Chocolate Alphabet Twenty-six, imaginative, clever little vignettes (one for every letter of the alphabet). Harlan's re-imaging of so many fantasy/sci-fi ideas puts this as the 2nd best story in the book.

Lonely Women are the Vessels of Time Pass.

Emissary from Hamelin Pass.

The New York Review of Bird Absolutely great. Absolutely hilarious. Cordwainer Bird is my favorite superhero now. He should get his own comic book series and early-morning TV show.

Seeing This one was great. Harlan's descriptive language is at its best here - everything lucid, yet abstract; flashing lights and moving parts wherever you look. A bit of a disappointing ending, though.

The Boulevard of Broken Dreams Very good.

Strange Wine Very very good (but a bit preachy).

The Diagnosis of Dr. D'arqueangel Pass.

Harlan's introductions to each story also can't be missed. (For those who don't do research, Harlan was a stunt writer - before people knew what the term meant - and a camera thug. Which I can excuse. There's no other easy way for a short story writer to get noticed.

Belinda Lewis says

So I've read a few of these stories and they read like the worst kind of art school pretentiousness.

And in between each story theres an exposition by the author who whines about 'kids these days and their damn tv,' while boasting about his sexual prowess and equating the act of writing to something akin to all the acts of Jesus, Buddha and Odin combined.

He comes across like such a wanker I can't finish this.

S.D. says

When someone says the name “Harlan,” I usually think Harlan Coben. I am afraid to say I have never heard of Harlan Ellison for fear it might send this caustic, “speak your mind” author into apoplexy. Ellison is more known for short stories than full length novels. *STRANGE WINE* is a collection of fifteen short stories “from the night side of the world” published in 1978. I had heard his name tossed around on a few chat lists, even saw a video of a rant against studios that expected him to donate a script rather than receive payment. One excellent example of his distaste of the publishing “experts” is “The New York Review of Bird.” This story finds Cordwainer Bird wreaking havoc on a bookstore that dares to hide his books in the basement versus in the front window with the bestsellers. I like the story “Mom” the best as the ghost of a Jewish mother still tries to control her son’s life. The title story, “Strange Wine” leaves the reader, or should leave the reader with a great lesson about life. Ellison has an unforgettable writing style, somewhere between exceptional and phenomenal.

Patrick says

Took my time with this one, as I'd like to enjoy Ellison's imagination for the remainder of my days. Some of the most inspired fiction ever imagined.

Tanya says

All my book reviews can be found here.

I read *Deathbird Stories* some years back, upon Stephen King's recommendation, who sung Ellison's praises in *Danse Macabre*, and considers both of these short story collections some of the finest horror fiction released in their time. I don't remember much of *Deathbird Stories* except for a few stand-outs (including the incredible title story) that have stayed with me all these years, and the fact that most of them managed to shock me while often walking a very fine line to distasteful. Their outrageousness, and the fact that I had expected pure horror fiction only to find that his background was firmly rooted in science and speculative fiction - two genres I wasn't particularly interested in in my early 20s - led to my relegating the other recommended collection to the bottom of my reading pile... until Ellison passed away at the end of June, which seemed like a good opportunity to delve back into his works.

Ellison was a divisive figure in writer circles, a self-professed hostile asshole, known for his outspoken and abrasive personality (his Wikipedia page has a 9-part “*controversies and disputes*” section), which shines through in this particular collection, where he wrote an introduction to each story, usually telling the reader where the idea came from, or why and how and where he wrote them. I thought that all of these introductions were highly interesting and actually contributed to my understanding or enjoyment of the tale that followed, for the most part. The whole collection opens with a longer introduction titled *Revealed at Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs! And You Don't Look So Terrific Yourself*, where he goes on a rant about the mind-numbing dangers of television:

"I now believe that television itself, the medium of sitting in front of a magic box that pulses images at us endlessly, the act of watching TV, per se, is mind crushing. It is soul deadening, dehumanizing, soporific in a poisonous way, ultimately brutalizing. It is, simply put so you cannot mistake my meaning, a bad thing."

I can get behind the sentiment, but I find it a bit rich coming from someone who made his living by penning screenplays for shows such as *Star Trek*, *Outer Limits*, *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, and later, *Babylon 5* and *The New Twilight Zone*. I don't have a problem with most of his views, just the holier-than-thou attitude and douchey, patronizing, sometimes sexist way he expressed them in. Anyway, the fact that he was an unlikeable, bitter old bully of a writer isn't news, so I'll try and separate the man from his work: I admire how he didn't pull any punches in the controversial topics he chose to write about, and he was capable of distilling the most wonderful thoughts on the craft and impact of writing in the simplest words, such as this excerpt from the same introduction:

"This is a collection of fantasies, strange wine. Fifteen draughts your mind can quaff. They lie here, silent, waiting for you to activate them with your imagination."

In writing them, I fulfilled myself. That is why I write. If this book were never to be opened and read they would, nonetheless, have served their purposes for me. I wrote them. But now they belong to you. They were mine only as long as they were unformed and incomplete. That is the nature of the tragedy: the work is mine only when it is being done. Thereafter it must be remanded to the custody of the readers, and the writer can only hope for intelligence, patience, and tender mercies."

I urge those of you who find pleasure or substance in these random dreams to ignore the analyses of academicians and critics. Ignore what they tell you these stories are "about." Surely, you will decide what they're about. What they mean and what they meant when I wrote them are quite different. When I wrote them they had personal significance for me. What they will do for you depends on how you feel at the moment you read them, whether or not you feel estranged or loved, what kind of a day you have had, where your emptiness lies on that particular day."

The three stars rating are almost a given, as most short stories collections are a mixed bag that ultimately averages out. There was only one story I really did not like, *The New York Review of Bird*, although the introduction to it was really interesting in its own right, although a bit self-indulgent. My favorites were *Hitler Painted Roses* and the titular *Strange Wine*, with *Croatoan*, *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, *In Fear of K*, and *Emissary from Hamelin* as other personal stand-outs.

Croatoan · ★★★★★

It's a testament to his already mentioned polemical nature that he chose to place this story as the very first in the collection. It's about a man who is forced to descend into New York's sewers by his hysterical girlfriend... to retrieve the aborted fetus he flushed down the toilet. It gained him death threats from pro choice and pro life defenders alike, but it's really less about abortion rights and more about personal responsibility.

Working With the Little People · ★★★1/2

The token story about writer's block that every writer seems to have to write at some point in their career. Rather amusing in parts and uncharacteristically light-hearted, it provides some commentary on the impact of legends.

Killing Bernstein · ★★1/2

An executive at a toy company kills his female ex-lover colleague whom he suspects of trying to sabotage his career... but then she turns up at work the next day looking just fine. It had the potential of turning into an absolutely brilliant story about obsession, madness, and the cracking boundaries between fantasy and reality, but then he ruined it with a ridiculously literal ending.

Mom · ★★★

In this tongue-in-cheek tale, so very different from everything else by Ellison I've read thus far, the ghost of a Jewish mother keeps nagging her surviving, grown son and tries to set him up with a respectable Jewish woman.

In Fear of K · ★★★★★

A man and woman who despise each other are trapped in an underground pit surrounded by a labyrinth prowled by an unseen monster they've taken to calling K. A rather chilling allegory about fear of the unknown, and the things we'd rather suffer through than face whatever awaits in the dark.

Hitler Painted Roses · ★★★★★

My favorite if I had to choose one, this story about injustice has little to do with its eye-catching title; it's about how reputation and belief affect and change reality, while following the damned soul of a woman wrongly executed for murder who has made her escape from Hell. What makes this story all the more remarkable is that he wrote it during a live radio broadcast during which listeners called in suggesting phrases he had to work in.

The Wine Has Been Left Open Too Long and the Memory Has Gone Flat · ★★

It's hard to write a story about sounds, but he somehow pulled it off. The imagery and descriptions were absolutely breathtaking, and I thought the underlying idea quite intriguing, but it ultimately fell flat for me (pun intended).

From A to Z, in the Chocolate Alphabet · ★★

Written over three days while sitting on display in a bookshop window, this story is actually twenty-six pastiches. Each letter of the alphabet is given a nonsense word and a paragraph-length vignette - sometimes just a few lines. Hard to rate as a whole and mostly forgettable (although I quite liked the one for the letter F), it's mostly note-worthy for the pretty unique stunt he pulled in writing it.

Lonely Women are the Vessels of Time · ★★★1/2

A brief and grim allegorical tale about loneliness, clearly a product of its time, when the sexual revolution was still in full swing.

Emissary from Hamelin · ★★★★★

The fabled Pied Piper comes back to Earth with an ultimatum and a warning to humans to stop destroying the planet.

The New York Review of Bird · ★ (or none at all)

A farcical, much too long story that's nothing but the vehicle for a personal rant; Ellison's own pseudonym (which he slapped on his work to alert readers when he felt that it had been butchered beyond repair by

others) comes to life and is on a mission to destroy the forces of evil who reign in the book publishing industry. Ridiculously bad, and very telling of his character.

Seeing · ★★★

Violent, grim, and nasty sci-fi horror with a slight Blade Runner vibe. In the future, a rich and powerful old lady arranges the kidnapping of a young woman with genetically rare "forever eyes", which can see much more than ordinary light, to have them transplanted into her own head.

The Boulevard of Broken Dreams · ★★★★★

Probably the most effective and chilling story in the collection, all the more remarkable because of its brevity. An old man who was at the Nuremberg trials sees dead Nazi war criminals walking down a Manhattan street...

Strange Wine · ★★★★★

Admittedly, this titular story lays it on pretty thick, but I loved it anyway. It follows an unlucky and unhappy man who believes he's actually an alien sent to Earth to live in a human body as a punishment for crimes he cannot remember.

The Diagnosis of Dr. D'arqueAngel · ★★1/2

A gorgeous doctor periodically injects her high-paying patients with doses of distilled essence of Death so they can build up a tolerance and live forever.

Marvin says

Another superb collection of Harlan Ellison's unique fiction. This is my second favorite Ellison short fiction collection right behind *Deathbird Stories*. Highlights: The stunning "Hitler Painted Roses" and the equally impressive "Boulevard of Broken Dreams". Also, The introductory essay "What Killed the Dinosaurs! And You Don't Look So Terrific Yourself" is not to be missed.

Bryce says

This is my first encounter with Harlan Ellison, my interest being piqued by his mention in Stephen King's *Danse Macabre*. I'm a fan of short form in general and especially the type of stories published during what I consider the golden period of the 50s through the 70s.

Strange Wine is a little darker than works by Philip K. Dick, doesn't have the moralistic twist ending favored by Ray Bradbury, and isn't as darkly terrifying as Charles Beaumont. What it does have is an energy, a clarity of purpose, that those other authors don't. Harlan Ellison is pissed off. He wants change. He wants people to know things, to feel things and all that comes through in his writing. And it makes for some great short stories that you can mull over for hours.

My favorites include "From A to Z, in the Chocolate Alphabet," the titular "Strange Wine," and "Seeing."

Checkman says

Harlan Ellison is one of those writers who I don't like as a person, but I do like his work. *Strange Wine* is a short story anthology and it's good. Very good. Normally I write more in-depth reviews, but short of reviewing each story in this anthology (which I am not going to do) just trust me when I say that the stories are all consistently well written. They cover the gamut from humorous to horrifying and all points in-between. I have no trouble giving it four stars.

The_Mad_Swede says

This was my first encounter with Harlan Ellison. Well, almost. I had read his introduction to the fourth *Sandman* volume *The Season of Mists*, which I'd always enjoyed, but nothing beyond that.

And now *Strange Wine*... A collection of short fiction that reveals a very fertile imagination and a sense of language that ranks among the best short fiction writers of the 20th century (at the very least). The collection, first published in 1978, includes an introduction railing against the evils of television and fifteen short stories of varying length, each with a presentation by Ellison himself (which often is just as much fun reading as the stories themselves).

The material sweeps between horror, dark fantasy, science fiction, the merely fantastical and metafiction, yet is all rooted in excellent storytelling and Ellison's absolutely wonderful prose.

The opening story "Croatoan" sets the mood and the ride just keeps going after that.

Ellison is a must read among American 20th century writers and a true master of the short story format.

Octavio Aragao says

Uma coletânea divertida, na qual a ironia permeia conceitos terríveis e maravilhosos. Poderia a morte ser evitada a conta gotas, graças a aplicações homeopáticas? Caso Hitler esteja no Inferno, será necessariamente um infeliz e sofredor? E o que aconteceu ao Sombra, famoso vingador das ondas de rádio, depois da aposentadoria? São questões que, apesar de aparentemente tolas, rendem histórias que prendem como se seus olhos fossem bifes pendurados nos ganchos de um açougue.

L. says

I've been a fan of Ellison for a quarter of a century and this, by far, is my favourite book of his. If you have never come across Ellison before, you're in for a treat. A master story-teller, he breaks new ground with practically every story, whether it is in the style of the telling - such as "From A to Z, The Chocolate Alphabet"-, or in the subject matter - "Croatoan." Whatever the style or the subject matter, the voice of Ellison is unmistakable, -uncompromising, vivid, funny, and perceptive- so that even if an Ellison story did not have his name above it, you would quickly guess whom it was. The stories range from the humorous

"Mom" to the serious "In Fear of K." Whatever he writes, he is thoroughly entertaining. What makes this collection of stories different from his others is that this collection has an introduction for every story. With any other writer, this would be an intrusion; but with Ellison, it works, because the man is funny, wise, and entertaining. They are basically a miscellany of anything that Ellison wants to talk about: How he came to write this or that story; where he wrote it; the ideas behind it- and sometimes the connection to the story is tenuous." The New York Review of Bird" for instance. You won't care. It is all good stuff. I usually find at least one story in any collection that I don't like, and this book is no exception. "Seeing" I found unreadable. This is a mere quibble. Everything else in here is just dandy. It even has a wonderful cover by Leo and Dianne Dillon. What more can a person want?

Tressa says

This is one of my favorite Harlan Ellison short stories collections, and it's probably mainly for the awesome, and brilliant "Hitler Painted Roses." I don't know how many times I've read this story but it's truly unforgettable, horrifying, and beautiful.

The one negative of the story: it introduced me to the evil that is Gilles de Rais. I did a little research on this infamous man in history and still haven't been able to sweep him from my mind. *shudder*

John Wiswell says

Harlan Ellison had (and still has) a wild imagination. Published over thirty years ago, this short story collection showcases how easily he brewed ideas. "Mom" is about the ghost of a Jewish mother nagging after her surviving son. "Croatoan" is about aborted babies and abandoned crocodiles residing in the sewers. "The New York Review of Bird" is about Ellison's own invented pseudonym coming to life and harassing a bookstore clerk.

The collection left me grateful that we have the umbrella of Speculative Fiction. While many are brooding, few of these try to become Horror stories. Most of these aren't really Science Fiction or Fantasy either; they're simply outlandish. "Hitler Painted Roses" begins with an almost-comedic opening, but transitions into melodrama as the lone escapee from Hell finds her target. Ellison's imagination obviously doesn't belong to one Genre-genre, but rather under a wide umbrella of the strange.

What unites these stories is attitude. Many protagonists sound just like Ellison, sometimes bitter, often worn down on patience or will to live, fruitlessly struggling for something. Sometimes they make you laugh, but others they hit Noir levels of grit. The attitude of a life incomprehensibly conspiring to leave them tried or unhappy binds the collection. That would be insufferable if not for Ellison's fantastic imagination for ways to do it.

Those ideas see varying degrees of success as proper stories. "Mom" is a fairly complete comedy. "The Diagnosis of Dr. D'arqueAngel" is a grim descent into fascination with immortality, and has a traditional flow of plot. Meanwhile "The New York Review of Bird" never really has a focus, being the vehicle for a rant; "Working With the Little People" is more of a cute idea than a story; and "Croatoan" veers from being mainstream malaise fiction to something surreal. Most are worth reading simply because of the ingenuity behind them. Even if it fails to establish an arc, it'll probably hit you with something neat.

The titular story is actually the weakest in the collection. "Strange Wine" follows a man who believes he's actually an alien sent to earth to live in a human body for his crimes. He sees our planet as a kind of prison or Hell. It's a neat concept that Ellison does nothing with: the man is unhappy with his situation, sees a psychiatrist who makes him repeat his situation, then dies and is told earth isn't a punishment, but actually the nicest place in the universe and he should have enjoyed it. The message isn't just obvious; it's repeated over paragraphs. There's no actual execution on the novel premise. It's merely preaching a point (if a nice one) at you, without any art around it.

You can't help coming away with an opinion of Ellison as a person. The collection opens with an essay ranting against television. Many of the stories have some central opinion or are in first person, and his first person voice sounds very similar every time – very similar, too, to his forewords. Every story is also accompanied by a foreword, typically about how he got the idea. Some of these real stories are as amusing as any of his fiction, like that a few were written in a glass department store window while the author was on public display. But others cross into Artist Statement territory, that awful space that robs readers of their own experience and force you to only see a point the writer was trying to make. In them he expresses disdain for the insane, browbeats anyone who has ever believed in any superstition or conspiracy theory, and relates at least three fights he had with people. He sells himself as a curmudgeon who really would like things to be better, and as in the foreword to "Strange Wine," admits that his own jaded nature is always challenged by some great act of individual kindness or goodness. It's the last angle on the attitude of his fiction, that thing that causes the protagonist of "Crotoan" to see the alligators and undead babies, and rather than call them monsters, decide to take care of them.

J.P. says

I first read this book in high school. I've dipped into it regularly since then. Technically, you can call it "fantasy" or "science fantasy". I call it American literature of the highest degree.

Ellison is one of my main inspirations as a writer. His work transcends the "science fiction/fantasy" tag. Ellison is an American Borges, a U.S. Italo Calvino. He easily takes his place among first-tier 20th Century American short story writers. The guy's language, his vision, are just that original. His work is utterly American, in the best of all possible ways.

If Ellison's collected stories intimates you due to length, start here. You won't regret it.
