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**DARK  
UNIVERSE**



**STORIES 1951-2001**

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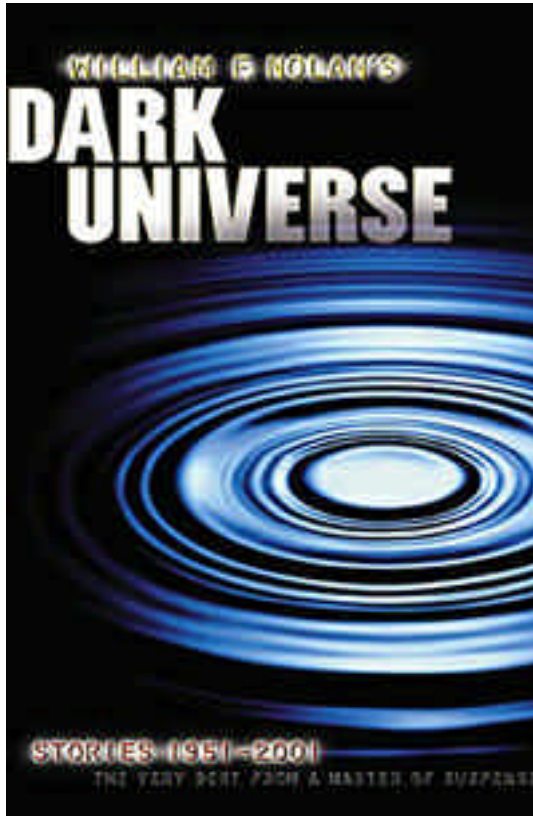
Introduction by  
Christopher Conlon  
Preface and Story Headings by  
William F. Nolan

***STEALTH PRESS***

*2001*

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# ABOUT WILLIAM F. NOLAN

**"I admire William F. Nolan, whom I've been reading since I was a nipper"—Dean Koontz**

William F. Nolan is best known as the co-author (with George Clayton Johnson) of *Logan's Run*— a science fiction novel that went on to become a part of popular culture as a movie and a television series and is about to become a movie again— and as single author of its sequels. His short stories have been selected for scores of anthologies and textbooks and he is twice winner of the Edgar Allan Poe Special Award from the Mystery Writers of America.



The author of *How to Write Horror Fiction*, Nolan has edited more than two dozen books in the fields of science fiction, horror, westerns, and suspense. His most recent anthology is *California Sorcery : A Group Celebration*.

Nolan is also a biographer and historian who has authored biographical and bibliographical books on Charles Beaumont, Ray Bradbury, John Huston, Phil Hill, Barney Oldfield, Ernest Hemingway, Steve McQueen, and Dashiell Hammett. He combined his expertise in pulp-era hard-boiled detectives and authors with his fiction skills to write a series of mysteries with three famed private-eye authors – Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Erle Stanley Gardner-solving crimes as the Black Mask Boys.

As a writer for films and television Nolan is credited with screenplays on *Burnt Offerings* and *Terror at London Bridge*. He has worked on 25 "Movies of the Week," including *The Turn of The Screw*, *Trilogy of Terror* and its sequel, *Bridge Across Time*, *Sky Heist*, *Melvin Purvis*, *G-Man*, *The Norliss Tapes*, and *The Kansas City Massacre*.



Nolan was born in 1928 in Kansas City Missouri. He attended the Kansas City Art Institute and worked as an artist for Hallmark Cards. (Correspondents and autograph-seekers are, to this day, frequent recipients of the author's sketches and doodles. A rather scary example is shown at left.) He moved to California in the late 1940s and studied at San Diego State College. He began concentrating on writing rather than art and, in 1952, was introduced by fellow Missouri native (and established writer) Ray Bradbury to another young up-and-coming author, Charles Beaumont. Moving to the Los Angeles area in 1953, Nolan became along with Bradbury, Beaumont, and Richard Matheson part of the "inner core" of the soon-to-be highly influential "Southern California Group" of writers. By 1956 Nolan was a full-time writer. Since 1951 he has sold more than 1500 stories, articles, books, and other works.

Nolan has lectured widely, taught a creative writing seminar at Bowling Green State University, and appeared on countless panels and in discussions at conventions.

Stealth Press is proud to offer the best of fifty years of William F. Nolan's short fiction along with his own comments on each story in a first edition collection in **Dark Universe**.

You may buy **Dark Universe** directly online from Stealth at [www.stealthpress.com](http://www.stealthpress.com).

*In the fall of 1991, when I was deep into a 24,000-word novella for Weird Tales, I received a phone call from a friend. "Seen the latest issue of Newsweek?" he asked. No, I had not. "Well, you're in it."*

*He was right. On page 60 of the October 28, 1991 issue, I was amazed (and delighted) to find my story, "The Party," listed as one of the seven outstanding terror tales of the century, alongside such all-time greats as "The Monkey's Paw," by W.W. Jacobs, and Saki's "The Open Window." A rare accolade.*

*This one, which began its life in a 1967 issue of Playboy, has been anthologized in several classic volumes, including Great Tales of Horror and the Supernatural. I adapted it for television in 1981, and printed the TV version in my collection, Things Beyond Midnight.*

*Here's a party you wouldn't want to attend.*

*But once you're there . . .*



## THE PARTY

*(Written: February 1966)*

Ashland frowned, trying to concentrate in the warm emptiness of the thickly carpeted lobby. Obviously, he had pressed the elevator button, because he was alone here and the elevator was blinking its way down to him, summoned from an upper floor. It arrived with an efficient hiss, the bronze doors clicked open, and he stepped in, thinking blackout. I had a mental blackout.

First the double vision. Now this. It was getting worse. Just where the hell was he? Must be a party, he told himself. Sure. Someone he'd met, whose name was missing along with the rest of it, had invited him to a party. He had an apartment number in his head: 9E. That much he retained. A number—nothing else.

On the way up, in the soundless cage of the elevator, David Ashland reviewed the day. The usual morning routine: work, then lunch with his new secretary. A swinger—but she liked her booze; put away three martinis to his two. Back to the office. More work. A drink in the afternoon with a writer. (“Beefeater. No rocks. Very dry.”) Dinner at the new Italian joint on West Forty-Eighth with

Linda. Lovely Linda. Expensive girl. Lovely as hell, but expensive. More drinks, then—nothing. Blackout.

The doc had warned him about the hard stuff, but what else can you do in New York? The pressures get to you, so you drink. Everybody drinks. And every night, somewhere in town, there's a party, with contacts (and girls) to be made . . .

The elevator stopped, opened its doors. Ashland stepped out, uncertainly, into the hall. The softly lit passageway was long, empty, silent. No, not silent. Ashland heard the familiar voice of a party: the shifting hive hum of cocktail conversation, dim, high laughter, the sharp chatter of ice against glass, a background wash of modern jazz . . . All quite familiar. And always the same.

He walked to 9E. Featureless apartment door. White. Brass button housing. Gold numbers. No clues here. Sighing, he thumbed the buzzer and waited nervously.

A smiling fat man with bad teeth opened the door. He was holding a half-filled drink in one hand. Ashland didn't know him.

"C'mon in fella," he said. "Join the party."

Ashland squinted into blue-swirled tobacco smoke, adjusting his eyes to the dim interior. The rising-falling sea tide of voices seemed to envelop him.

"Grab a drink, fella," said the fat man. "Looks like you need one!"

Ashland aimed for the bar in one corner of the crowded apartment. He *did* need a drink. Maybe a drink would clear his head, let him get this all straight. Thus far, he had not recognized any of the faces in the smoke-hazed room.

At the self-service bar a thin, turkey-necked woman wearing paste jewelry was intently mixing a black Russian. "Got to be exceedingly careful with these," she said to Ashland, eyes still on the mixture. "Too much vodka craps them up."

Ashland nodded. "The host arrived?" *I'll know him, I'm sure.*

"Due later—or sooner. Sooner—or later. You know, I once spilled three black Russians on the same man over a thirty-day period. First on the man's sleeve, then on his back, then on his lap. Each time his suit was a sticky, gummy mess. My psychiatrist

told me that I did it unconsciously, because of a neurotic hatred of this particular man. He looked like my father.”

“The psychiatrist?”

“No, the man I spilled the Russians on.” She held up the tall drink, sipped at it. “Ahhh . . . still too weak.”

Ashland probed the room for a face he knew, but these people were all strangers.

He turned to find the turkey-necked woman staring at him. “Nice apartment,” he said mechanically.

“Stinks. I detest pseudo-Chinese decor in Manhattan brownstones.” She moved off, not looking back at Ashland.

He mixed himself a straight Scotch, running his gaze around the apartment. The place *was* pretty wild: ivory tables with serpent legs; tall, figured screens with chain-mail warriors cavorting across them; heavy brocade drapes in stitched silver; lamps with jewel-eyed dragons looped at the base. And, at the far end of the room, an immense bronze gong suspended between a pair of demon-faced swordsmen. Ashland studied the gong. A thing to wake the dead, he thought. Great for hangovers in the morning.

“Just get here?” a girl asked him. She was red-haired, full-breasted, in her late twenties. Attractive. Damned attractive. Ashland smiled warmly at her.

“That’s right,” he said, “I just arrived.” He tasted the Scotch; it was flat, watery. “Whose place is this?”

The girl peered at him above her cocktail glass. “Don’t you know who invited you?”

Ashland was embarrassed. “Frankly, no. That’s why I—”

“My name’s Viv. For Vivian. I drink. What do you do? Besides drink?”

“I produce. I’m in television.”

“Well, I’m in a dancing mood. Shall we?”

“Nobody’s dancing,” protested Ashland. “We’d look—foolish.”

The jazz suddenly seemed louder. Overhead speakers were sending out a thudding drum solo behind muted strings. The girl’s body rippled to the sounds.

“Never be afraid to do anything foolish,” she told him. “That’s the secret of survival.” Her fingers beckoned him. “C’mon . . .”

“No, really—not right now. Maybe later.”

“Then I’ll dance alone.”

She spun into the crowd, her long red dress whirling. The other partygoers ignored her. Ashland emptied the watery Scotch and fixed himself another. He loosened his tie, popping the collar button. *Damn!*

“I train worms.”

Ashland turned to a florid-faced little man with bulging, feverish eyes. “I heard you say you were in TV,” the little man said. “Ever use any trained worms on your show?”

“No . . . no, I haven’t.”

“I breed ’em, train ’em. I teach a worm to run a maze. Then I grind him up and feed him to a dumb, untrained worm. Know what happens? The dumb worm can run the maze! But only for twenty-four hours. Then he forgets—unless I keep him on a trained-worm diet. I defy you to tell me that isn’t fascinating!”

“It is, indeed.” Ashland nodded and moved away from the bar. The feverish little man smiled after him, toasting his departure with a raised glass. Ashland found himself sweating.

Who was his host? Who had invited him? He knew most of the Village crowd, but had spotted none of them here . . .

A dark, doll-like girl asked him for a light. He fumbled out some matches.

“Thanks,” she said, exhaling blue smoke into blue smoke. “Saw that worm guy talking to you. What a lousy bore he is! My ex-husband had a pet snake named Baby and he fed it worms. That’s all they’re good for, unless you fish. Do you fish?”

“I’ve done some fishing up in Canada.”

“My ex-husband hated all sports. Except the indoor variety.” She giggled. “Did you hear the one about the indoor hen and the outdoor rooster?”

“Look, miss—”

“Talia. But you can call me Jenny. Get it?” She doubled over, laughing hysterically, then swayed, dropping her cigarette. “Oops! I’m sick. I better go lie down. My tum-tum feels awful.”

She staggered from the party as Ashland crushed out her smoldering cigarette with the heel of his shoe. *Stupid bitch!*

A sharp handclap startled him. In the middle of the room, a tall man in a green satin dinner jacket was demanding his attention. He clapped again. "You," he shouted to Ashland. "Come here."

Ashland walked forward. The tall man asked him to remove his wristwatch. "I'll read your past from it," the man said. "I'm psychic. I'll tell you about yourself."

Reluctantly, Ashland removed his watch, handed it over. He didn't find any of this amusing. The party was annoying him, irritating him.

"I thank you most kindly, sir!" said the tall man, with elaborate stage courtesy. He placed the gold watch against his forehead and closed his eyes, breathing deeply. The crowd noise did not slacken; no one seemed to be paying any attention to the psychic.

"Ah. Your name is David. David Ashland. You are successful, a man of big business . . . a producer . . . and a bachelor. You are twenty-eight . . . young for a successful producer. One has to be something of a bastard to climb that fast. What about that, Mr. Ashland, *are* you something of a bastard?"

Ashland flushed angrily.

"You like women," continued the tall man. "A lot. And you like to drink. A lot. Your doctor told you—"

"I don't have to listen to this," Ashland said tightly, reaching for his watch. The man in green satin handed it over, grinned amiably, and melted back into the shifting crowd.

I ought to get the hell out of here, Ashland told himself. Yet curiosity held him. When the host arrived, Ashland would piece this evening together; he'd know why he was here, at this particular party. He moved to a couch near the closed patio doors and sat down. He'd wait.

A soft-faced man sat down next to him. The man looked pained. "I shouldn't smoke these," he said, holding up a long cigar. "Do you smoke cigars?"

"No."

"I'm a salesman. Dover Insurance. Like the White Cliffs of, ya know. I've studied the problems involved in smoking. Can't quit, though. When I do, the nerves shrivel up, stomach goes sour. I

worry a lot—but we all worry, don't we? I mean, my mother used to worry about the earth slowing down. She read somewhere that between 1680 and 1690 the earth lost twenty-seven hundredths of a second. She said that meant something."

Ashland sighed inwardly. What is it about cocktail parties that causes people you've never met to unleash their troubles?

"You meet a lotta fruitcakes in my dodge," said the pained-looking insurance salesman. "I sold a policy once to a guy who lived in the woodwork. Had a ratty little walk-up in the Bronx with a foldaway bed. Kind you push into the wall. He'd *stay* there—I mean, inside the wall—most of the time. His roommate would invite some friends in and if they made too much noise the guy inside the wall would pop out with his Thompson. BAM! The bed would come down and there he was with a Thompson submachine gun aimed at everybody. Real fruitcake."

"I knew a fellow who was *twice* that crazy."

Ashland looked up into a long, cadaverous face. The nose had been broken and improperly reset; it canted noticeably to the left. He folded his long, sharp-boned frame onto the couch next to Ashland. "This fellow believed in falling grandmothers," he declared. "Lived in upper Michigan. 'Watch out for falling grandmothers,' he used to warn me. 'They come down pretty heavy in this area. Most of 'em carry umbrellas and big packages and they come flapping down out of the sky by the thousands!' This Michigan fellow swore he saw one hit a postman. 'An awful thing to watch,' he told me. 'Knocked the poor soul flat. Crushed his skull like an egg.' I recall he shuddered just telling me about it."

"Fruitcake," said the salesman. "Like the guy I once knew who wrote on all his walls and ceilings. A creative writer, he called himself. Said he couldn't write on paper, had to use a wall. Paper was too flimsy for him. He'd scrawl these long novels of his, a chapter in every room, with a big black crayon. Words all over the place. He'd fill up the house, then rent another one for his next book. I never read any of his houses, so I don't know if he was any good."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said Ashland. "I need a fresh drink."

He hurriedly mixed another Scotch at the bar. Around him,

the party rolled on inexorably, without any visible core. What time was it, anyway? His watch had stopped.

"Do you happen to know what time it is?" he asked a long-haired Oriental girl who was standing near the bar.

"I've no idea," she said. "None at all." The girl fixed him with her eyes. "I've been watching you, and you seem horribly *alone*. Aren't you?"

"Aren't I what?"

"Horribly alone?"

"I'm not with anyone, if that's what you mean."

The girl withdrew a jeweled holder from her bag and fitted a cigarette in place. Ashland lit it for her.

"I haven't been really alone since I was in Milwaukee," she told him. "I was about—God!—fifteen or something, and this creep wanted me to move in with him. My parents were both dead by then, so I was all alone."

"What did you do?"

"Moved in with the creep. What else? I couldn't make the being-alone scene. Later on, I killed him."

"You what?"

"Cut his throat." She smiled delicately. "In self-defense, of course. He got mean on the bottle one Friday night and tried to knife me. I had witnesses."

Ashland took a long draw on his Scotch. A scowling fellow in shirt sleeves grabbed the girl's elbow and steered her roughly away.

"I used to know a girl who looked like that," said a voice to Ashland's right. The speaker was curly-haired, clean-featured, in his late thirties. "Greek belly dancer with a Jersey accent. Dark, like her, and kind of mysterious. She used to quote that line of Hemingway's to Scott Fitzgerald—you know the one."

"Afraid not."

"One that goes, 'We're all bitched from the start.' Bitter. A bitter line."

He put out his hand. Ashland shook it.

"I'm Travers. I used to save America's ass every week on CBS."

"Beg pardon?"

"Terry Travers. The old *Triple Trouble for Terry* series on

channel nine. Back in the late fifties. Had to step on a lotta toes to get that series.”

“I think I recall the show. It was—”

“Dung. That’s what it was. Cow dung. Horse dung. The *worst*. Terry Travers is not my real name, natch. Real one’s Abe Hockstatter. Can you imagine a guy named Abe Hockstatter saving America’s ass every week on CBS?”

“You’ve got me there.”

Hockstatter pulled a brown wallet from his coat, flipped it open. “There I am with one of my other rugs on,” he said, jabbing at a photo. “Been stone bald since high school. Baldies don’t make it in showbiz, so I have my rugs. Go ahead, tug at me.”

Ashland blinked. The man inclined his head. “*Pull* at it. Go on—as a favor to me!”

Ashland tugged at the fringe of Abe Hockstatter’s curly hair-piece.

“Tight, huh? Really *snug*. Stays on the old dome.”

“Indeed it does.”

“They cost a fortune. I’ve got a wind-blown one for outdoor scenes. A stiff wind’ll lift a cheap one right off your scalp. Then I got a crew cut and a Western job with long sideburns. All kinds. Ten, twelve . . . all first-class.”

“I’m certain I have seen you,” said Ashland. “I just don’t—”

“S’awright. Believe me. Lotta people don’t know me since I quit the *Terry* thing. I booze like crazy now. You an’ me, we’re among the nation’s six million alcoholics.”

Ashland glared at the actor. “Where do you get off linking me with—”

“Cool it, cool it. So I spoke a little out of turn. Don’t be so touchy, chum.”

“To hell with you!” snapped Ashland.

The bald man with curly hair shrugged and drifted into the crowd.

Ashland took another long pull at his Scotch. All these neurotic conversations . . . He felt exhausted, wrung dry, and the Scotch was lousy. No kick to it. The skin along the back of his neck felt tight, hot. A headache was coming on; he could always tell.



A slim-figured, frosted blonde in black sequins sidled up to him. She exuded an aura of matrimonial wars fought and lost. Her orange lipstick was smeared, her cheeks alcohol-flushed behind flaking pancake make-up. "I have a theory about sleep," she said. "Would you like to hear it?"

Ashland did not reply.

"My theory is that the world goes insane every night. When we sleep, our subconscious takes charge and we become victims to whatever it conjures up. Our conscious mind is totally blanked out. We lie there, helpless, while our subconscious flings us about. We fall off high buildings, or have to fight a giant ape, or we get buried in quicksand . . . We have absolutely no control. The mind whirls madly in the skull. Isn't that an unsettling thing to consider?"

"Listen," said Ashland. "Where's the host?"

"He'll get here."

Ashland put down his glass and turned away from her. A mounting wave of depression swept him toward the door. The room seemed to be solid with bodies, all talking, drinking, gesturing in the milk-thick smoke haze.

"Potatoes have eyes," said a voice to his left. "I really *believe* that." The remark was punctuated by an ugly, frog-croaking laugh.

"Today is tomorrow's yesterday," someone else said.

A hot swarm of sound:

"You can't get prints off human skin."

"In China, the laborers make sixty-five dollars a year. How the hell can you live on sixty-five dollars a year?"

"So he took out his Luger and blew her head off."

"I knew a policewoman who loved to scrub down whores."

"Did you ever try to live with eight kids, two dogs, a three-legged cat and twelve goldfish?"

"Like I told him, those X-rays destroyed his white cells."

"They found her in the tub. Strangled with a coat hanger."

"What I had, exactly, was a grade-two epidermoid carcinoma at the base of a seborrheic keratosis."

Ashland experienced a sudden, raw compulsion: somehow he had to stop these voices!

The Chinese gong flared gold at the corner of his eye. He pushed his way over to it, shouldering the partygoers aside. He would strike it—and the booming noise would stun the crowd; they'd have to stop their incessant, maddening chatter.

Ashland drew back his right fist, then drove it into the circle of bronze. He felt the impact, and the gong shuddered under his blow.

*But there was no sound from it!*

The conversation went on.

Ashland smashed his way back across the apartment.

"You can't stop the party," said the affable fat man at the door.

"I'm leaving!"

"So go ahead," grinned the fat man. "Leave."

Ashland clawed open the door and plunged into the hall, stumbling, almost falling. He reached the elevator, jabbed at the DOWN button.

Waiting, he found it impossible to swallow; his throat was dry. He could feel his heart hammering against the wall of his chest. His head ached.

The elevator arrived, opened. He stepped inside. The doors closed smoothly and the cage began its slow, automatic descent.

Abruptly, it stopped.

The doors parted to admit a solemn-looking man in a dark blue suit.

Ashland gasped. "Freddie!"

The solemn face broke into a wide smile. "Dave! It's great to see you! Been a long time."

"But—you can't be Fred Baker!"

"Why? Have I changed so much?"

"No, no, you look—exactly the same. But that car crash in Albany. I thought you were . . ." Ashland hesitated, left the word unspoken. He was pale, frightened. Very frightened. "Look, I'm—I'm late. Got somebody waiting for me at my place. Have to rush . . ." He reached forward to push the LOBBY button.

There was none.

The lowest button read FLOOR 2.

"We use this elevator to get from one party to another," Freddie

Baker said quietly, as the cage surged into motion. "That's all it's good for. You get so you need a change. They're all alike, though—the parties. But you learn to adjust, in time."

Ashland stared at his departed friend. The elevator stopped.

"Step out," said Freddie. "I'll introduce you around. You'll catch on, get used to things. No sex here. And the booze is watered. Can't get stoned. That's the dirty end of the stick."

Baker took Ashland's arm, propelled him gently forward.

Around him, pressing in, David Ashland could hear familiar sounds: nervous laughter, ice against glass, muted jazz—and the ceaseless hum of cocktail voices.

Freddie thumbed a buzzer. A door opened.

The smiling fat man said, "C'mon in fellas. Join the party."

# ABOUT STEALTH PRESS

## **What is Stealth Press?**

Stealth Press is a book publisher with an approach we call Direct Publishing.

## **How does Direct Publishing work?**

Stealth Press publishes original and out-of-print titles in high quality hardcover editions. The books are then sold directly to readers via the Internet as well as through fine bookstores and libraries. We also use the Internet in a number of other ways to enhance our operations.

## **How is Stealth different from all the other new publishing companies?**

It is easiest to point out what Stealth Press is NOT. We publish "real books"-- Smyth-sewn, clothbound with acid-free paper--books made with attention to detail, to last. Although print-on-demand publishers (like Lightning Source) are doing a "pretty good" job, their books simply do not compare with a Stealth book. Because we publish physical books, we are not an e-book publisher (RocketBooks, eMatter, BiblioBytes). We publish books from critically acclaimed authors with successful track records, we are not a vanity press (iUniverse, Xlibris).

## **Then Stealth will be a small press focusing on producing a few titles each year or a specialty press issuing only a limited press run?**

No. Stealth will have more than 30 titles in print by the end of 2001. Those titles will not be printed in a limited number. (Stealth, in some cases, will issue special signed limited editions as well, but there will always be a trade edition.) And we have no intention of staying this small.

## **How does this differ from Big Publishing?**

Each year, thousands of titles are rotated out of print by major publishers. Many of these titles are selling, but are not selling *well enough* to be considered worthwhile by the "bestselling hits"-based publishing industry. Other titles -- by critically acclaimed authors-- may not sell *well enough* to warrant interest from the Big Guys, but deserve a longer life (and more sales) than a limited edition run from a small press can provide. Stealth's direct publishing model allows it to profitably sell these titles.

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