

# ***THE EARTH BOOKS***

**ROBERT F. YOUNG**

*Robert Young, whose stories have appeared regularly both here and in our companion magazine, AMAZING SF, returns with a remarkable story about an author and his creation*

**Illustrated by TONY GLEESON**

**M**Y MUSE does the darnedest things. Her favorite trick, of course, is hiding on me. The other day when she came up missing I found her down at the corner bar, sipping a slow gin, and last night after searching through the whole house for her I found her sitting all alone on the back porch steps, gazing up at the stars. And it was only ten above, mind you!

"What in the world are you doing, sitting out here on a night like this looking at the stars?" I asked her sternly (not too sternly, of course: Muses take offense easily, and when they do they go away and if they're real mad they never come back).

She pointed heavenward at the constellation Auriga where bright Capella shone. "That's my birthplace," she said. "If you came from another planet, wouldn't you look up at it now and then, even if you couldn't see it?"

"Not on a night like this. Not when it's ten above. I'd wait till spring, or, if I couldn't wait, I'd move down south. And if I couldn't wait and I couldn't move, I'd at least put my overcoat on."

"Tsk. You writers are all alike. Chicken. On Capella XII we consider weather like this a heat wave. As a matter of fact, when the temperature gets all the way up to ten, we carry fans with us and fan ourselves."

"Cardboard fans?"

"Well we don't carry air conditioners, if that's what you mean."

"In summer it must be lots warmer."

"Summer is when I'm talking about. In winter it gets so cold the air freezes. Then we throw oxygen snowballs at each other to keep warm."

"Well at least that's better than carrying fans with you wherever you go."

"It would be if we didn't have to carry oxygen tanks on our shoulders and wear masks. I think I'll go back inside and have a cold glass of lemonade. Are there any ice cubes?"

"There's a tray in the freezer."

**CAPELLA XII** didn't turn out to be half as bad as she'd tried to make out. Granted, their mean temperature is considerably lower than Earth's; but there are days in mid-summer when you can go around in your shirtsleeves if you happen to be the manly type, and there are even jungles in some of the equatorial regions. As for the Capellans having to carry oxygen tanks in winter, she made that up. The air doesn't freeze, except maybe at the poles, and nobody lives there except the Scudges, who don't need air in the first place.

However, Capella XII's climate is one thing, Capellan XII civilization quite another. The less said about it, the better, although I suppose you could find worse ones if you looked hard enough. I could understand now why my Muse had moved to Earth. Nevertheless, certain basic similarities exist between it and my own, and I had no great trouble adjusting, once I'd mastered the major language.

Among the most fascinating—to me, anyway—of the professions that thrive there is the writing profession. There are writers galore, among them a literary giant who for decades has been writing

imaginative stories set on a planet named Earth. The Earth Books, they're called. What's most remarkable about them is that he doesn't even know there is an Earth. He made his up. But in many respects it's uncannily like the real thing. It's located in the right sector of space, it's the third of nine planets orbiting a GO star, it has a 24-hour day and a 365-day year. It even has a moon. You name it, and *iii*'s Earth has it. *iii* is the imaginative writer's pen name.

AFTER READING the Earth Books I decided that as long as I was visiting Capella XII I might as well have a chat with their remarkable creator, and learning that he lived not far from where I was staying, I arranged a meeting with him through his agent.

Seen from the air, his ranch Tircina brings to mind the inner surface of a shallow crimson soup dish. The ranch buildings are in the exact center, and the concave terrain surrounding them is dotted with grazing Capellan cattle. A small green lake just south of the buildings looks for all the world like a left-over drop of pea soup.

A graying but still sturdy individual in his early 70's, some 30 pounds of books behind him, *iii* came forth to greet me when his butler, after admitting me to the main structure (an imposing three-storied affair with four cupolas and two towers), ushered me into the drawing room and left. It was clear to me from the eager light that came into the old author's deep-set eyes as we shook hands (a custom as common on Capella XII as on Earth) that he seldom had visitors any more; that despite the wheelbarrows full of money his books still brought in their creator had faded into the background. I had let it be known that I worked for a weekly periodical, deeming it kinder not to impugn the validity of his make-believe Earth by revealing my true provenance. Thus, I was doubly welcome—as a visitor and as an interviewer as well.

*iii* indicated two comfortable chairs facing a wide window that looked out upon an expanse of red sward pied with grazing Capellan steers. "As you can see," he said without preamble, "I lead a somewhat solitary existence these days. My children have grown up and left, and my wife spends most of her time traveling on the continent, collecting bric-a-brac, antique furniture and just plain junk. But I don't mind."

"Do you still write?" I asked.

"Oh yes. A book every six months, just as always. And always the same one." *iii* chuckled.

"I've always been an avid fan of yours," I lied, "and I've always marveled at the vividness of your imagination. But it's your Earth Books that intrigue me the most, even though they constitute only an insignificant part of your output. If we may, I'd like to discuss them."

A slight turning down of the corners of *iii*'s mouth betrayed a mild disappointment, and I instantly divined its cause: his Earth Books, while popular enough in their own right, have not sold nearly as many copies as his Tircin Books, and on Capella XII a writer's heart is where his treasure is. I had skimmed through his Tircin series, and quite frankly they had left me cold. I have no quarrel with talking animals or with brachiating superheroes; but I am, despite my affinity for imaginative literature, or perhaps because of it, highly critical of pedestrian excursions into a genre that demands a light—almost a magic—touch.

*iii* quickly banished his disappointment behind a pleasant smile that softened the set lines of his bull-doglike countenance. "Please proceed," he said graciously.

"I am intrigued almost as much by the hero of the Earth Books as I am by his heroic deeds," I went on. "Or perhaps I should say 'puzzled'. Does he perhaps have a real-life prototype?"

*iii* shook his head. "I made him up. Out of whole cloth."

I had surmised as much.

"What is it about Thon Karther that puzzles you?" *iii* asked.

"Well, I'll overlook the fact that he doesn't age physically. You cover that pretty well by attributing it to 'genetic transformations engendered by his astral journey', just as you cover the Princess' seeming agelessness to 'certain goddess-like qualities inherent in her gentle nature'. I guess what puzzles me the most about Thon is his motivation."

*iii* seemed surprised. "His motivation! Why, I thought that was crystal clear. He wants to serve his

adopted country in every way he can, to bring an end to senseless bloodshed. Thon

Karther, I'll have you know, is an idealist of the highest order."

"All that may be true, but you must admit there're certain vital inconsistencies in his character. He professes to hate war, yet he fights like a demon in every one that comes along. And he also professes to hate underhandedness, yet he never shows his own hand, or himself either whenever he can avoid doing so. And finally there's his ultimate apostasy—"

"*Apostasy!*" *iii* seemed shocked.

"Let's begin at the beginning," I said. "In *A Princess of Earth*, he arrives on Earth, following his miraculous astral journey, in the midst of a world-wide conflict. No sooner does he get there than the country he subsequently adopts as his own becomes involved in the action. Whereupon he immediately enlists and fights furiously in its behalf. So furiously does he fight, in fact, and so many of the Bad Guys does he dispatch, the reader gets the impression that he virtually wins the war single-handed. Yet he remains a nonentity insofar as his adopted countrymen are concerned, and somehow manages never to be mentioned in any of the news media. He virtually drops out of sight. This despite the fact that after the war is over he wins and marries the Princess Tor whom, presumably at least, the Good Guys were fighting."

"Aside from the fact that Thon Karther, beneath his warrior's veneer, is a modest, unassuming man who doesn't *want* fame," *iii* said coldly, "there is in this instance a physical explanation for his dropping out of sight. If you will reread the book you will find that shortly after his marriage to the Princess he undergoes a second astral transition—this time back to Capella XII—"

"Where," I went on quickly, "he languishes, for some twenty-three years before at last acquiring the ability to project his astral self at will through time and space. Re-arriving back on Earth (*The Gods of Earth*: Chapter I), he finds that his Princess has disappeared; he also finds himself in the midst of a second planet-wide conflict, and again, mere moments after his arrival, his adopted country becomes involved. Immediately his patriotism—or should I say his 'chauvinism'?—comes to the fore, and deferring searching for his Princess to a later date, he again enlists and plunges into battle, fighting with the same fervor as before till a severe abdominal wound sidelines him and results in his being sent back to his adopted homeland. Recovering, he promptly begins searching for his Princess; but, ever mindful of his country's welfare, he simultaneously brings his telepathic powers into play and directs the development of a superweapon that enables the Good Guys to win hands down, but which after the war falls into the hands of one of their allies, who, it turns out, aren't Good Guys after all, but Bad Ones. . . Incidentally, I was a little confused as to where the title of this one derived: the original Bad Guys didn't claim to be gods."

"That's quite right," admitted *iii*. "But *The Gods of Earth* made much better copy than *The Supermen of Earth* would have, and since I write for a living I chose the former. But we're digressing: I believe the original subject was Thon Karther's motivation."

"Yes, of course. Well, on the final page of *The Gods of Earth*, Thon Karther still hasn't found his Princess, and we now go into *The Warlord of Earth*. Still a nonentity despite his heroic deeds on the fields of battle and still an unsung citizen despite his invention by proxy of the super-weapon, he continues searching for his Princess. At length, another war breaks out, a minor one, and again he takes up the Cause, giving the usual heroic account of himself. But this time, despite his valiant efforts, the Good Guys have to settle for a truce. Whilst keeping a telepathic eye on the military, he resumes searching for his Princess, combing every continent on the planet. To no avail. Now, still another minor war breaks out, a highly unpopular one, and once again Thon Karther enters the melee; but alas!—the Good Guys are stymied and again have to settle for a truce. He is now, to all intents and purposes—as your title suggests—in complete control of the military via his telepathic powers, and can, any time he deems his adopted country to be in dire peril, bring on a third global conflict. I must say, that for a man who professes to hate war, he has certainly developed a talent for waging them.

Faint red splotches had come into being on *iii's* rather pale cheeks. "But what better way could he serve his adopted countrymen than by becoming proficient in the art of war!" he demanded. "We're talking about planetary beings with war bred into their bones. There were hundreds of wars on Earth

before Thon Karther even got there—thousands! I took great pains to build a believable background. It's all there in the first Earth Book in flashback form. The carnage, the pillage, the wanton destruction of whole cities, whole nations. *Delenda est Carthago . . .*" *iii* wrung his hands. "How else could Thon Karther have aided his adopted country than by doing what he did? Than by finally taking telepathic control of its war machine? What better proof could there be of his noble motivation than his dedication and bravery on the field of battle, than his great and abiding love for his Princess?"

"Maybe none," I said. "But now, in the final pages of *The Warlord*, he appears to have turned *against* the Good Guys. Now, he's dabbling in politics and interfering with the judicial system—behind the scenes of course—and he's got everybody so screwed up morally, emotionally, intellectually and economically that they're no longer certain which horizon the sun's going to come up over the next day. Did he turn against his adopted countrymen because he finally found his Princess dancing in a Chippewa Street Go-Go Girl dive in Buffalo, New York, and wanted to get even?"

*iii* was still wringing his hands. His face, reflected in the window against the backdrop of red sward and contentedly grazing Capellan steers, was twisted with pain, a study in ultimate anguish. "I—I don't know," he said. "Thon Karther seems to Kaye got out of hand. It was a mistake to make him an idealist—I can see that now. I'm almost afraid to begin Book IV. I—I thought maybe I could fix things if I let the younger generation take over, but now I don't know. Thon and the Princess had a son, you'll remember, and it was my idea to make *him* the hero. But every time I sit down to write, ghastly visions take shape in my mind. I—I see anarchy, chaos, famine, disaster. I see things *worse* than war. Please help me: I don't know what to do."

I stood up. The last thing in the world I'd wanted was to bring this literary giant to his knees, to see him cringe. Mumbling a series of half-incoherent apologies, I fled.

WHEN I got back to Earth, my Muse was sound asleep in the spare bedroom. I stood in the doorway, gazing fondly at her golden hair spread out on the pillow, at her mischievous elfin face. I do a lot of bitching about the *status quo*, like everybody else I know, but deep down inside me I like this planet I live on, this lovely Earth where I was born., This land of promises and sweet fulfillments, this paradise that has never had to harken to the thunder of a warlord's tread.

Thank you, gentle gods and goddess, wherever you may be, for making this Earth real and consigning *iii's* to the realm of make-believe.

I looked once more at my sleeping Muse. Then, gently, I closed the door and locked it. If she wishes to leave me, I know a locked door will not stop her; but if she sees it is locked, she will know how much I want her to stay; and knowing this, perhaps she will remain.

—ROBERT F. YOUNG