

Michael Swanwick: After Science Fiction Died

It was a dedicated virus that destroyed science fiction. It attacked that rarefied fraction of the cerebellum that only true visionaries can access, and then, under the impetus of applied imagination, spread, destroying most of the forebrain. In less than a decade, all our best writers were reduced to the level of animals. Vernor Vinge, Jim Kelly, Nancy Kress, Kim Stanley Robinson – all fled into the forest to live off berries and unwary chipmunks. Bruce Sterling was seen leading a feral existence in Austin, raiding Dumpsters and mating with coyotes.

They say the virus was launched by Internet pirates, angry at SFWA's attempts to enforce the copyright laws. No matter, the tragedy was unspeakable, whatever the source.

I alone of my generation escaped the curse, and that only because for commercial reasons I'd switched over to fantasy. After my third Big Fat Book, I felt my imaginative faculties shrivel and die. At the time, I was sorry.

But because the plague's victims were my friends – some of them – I felt it my due to do what I could to save them. My wife was a biologist. With some of my new wealth, I bought her the gene sequencers and viral operating programs she needed to design a retroviral cure.

She was careful not to tell me about her work, lest it re-animate my imagination. We both knew that I was at risk.

The other night, though, Marianne and I were driving slowly through the backwoods of Kentucky, scattering her latest experimental virus, when we had a flat.

With a groan, I pulled over and got out the spare.

Midway through the operation, somebody came shambling out from the trees, carrying a torch. He was naked and filthy and his hair hung down to his ass, but I recognized him as an old friend.

It was Terry Bisson.

He looked at me, and there was an almost intelligent light in those eyes. I said something to him, but he just shook his head, and held that torch until I was done. Then he shambled back into the woods.

Neither of us said anything for a while. But at last, with new-born hope in my heart, I spoke. "Looks like ol' Terr's discovered fire," I said.