

## Coyote at the End of History

MICHAEL SWANWICK

Michael Swanwick's [[www.michaelswanwick.com](http://www.michaelswanwick.com)] novels include the Nebula Award winner, *Stations of the Tide* (1991), *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993) and *Jack Faust* (1997), and his new novel *Bones of the Earth* (2002). His short fiction in recent years has been fantasy as often as science fiction, but his stories dominated the short fiction Hugo Award nominations in recent years. Swanwick is also the author of two influential critical essays, one on SF, "User's Guide to the Postmoderns" (1985), and one on fantasy, "In The Tradition..." (1994). His short fiction has been collected principally in *Gravity's Angels* (1991), *A Geography of Unknown Lands* (1997), *Moon Dogs* (2000), *Tales of Old Earth* (2000), and *Puck Aleshire's Abecedary* (2000). In addition to his other writing, for the last couple of years Swanwick has written a large number of short-short stories, sometimes as many as four or five a week. His collection of short-shorts, *Cigar-Box Faust and Other Miniatures*, appeared in 2003.

"Coyote at the End of History" appears in Asimov's, and is a light, clever story composed of several short pieces (worth comparing to the Haldeman story earlier in this book). Here, though, trickster Swanwick is stepping into Le Guin's turf—SF based on transformed anthropology and folklore.

### Coyote and the Star People

Coyote was walking up and down the Earth, as he did in those days, when he decided to visit the spaceport at First Landing, which was then called Kansas City. He had heard a lot about the Star People, and he wanted to see them for himself.

When he got there he found that the Star People were like nobody he had ever seen. They were tall and slender and their skin was golden. Two of their eyes were like emeralds and the rest were like garnets. As soon as he met them he decided to play some sort of trick on them. That was just the way Coyote was.

"Where do you come from?" Coyote asked.

"Our home is deep in the Milky Way. Where is yours?"

"I left where I lived, but I do not know how long ago."

"Yes?"

"Now I go everywhere. But I never know where I am going." All the while he was talking, Coyote was secretly looking around him. The Star People were very rich. They had many wonderful things. "That is a very fine starship you have," he said. "Perhaps you can show me how to build one of my own."

"Oh no, we can't do that."

"You have nice weapons, too. I wouldn't mind buying some of them."

"There are many of you and only a few of us," the Star People said. (This was a long time ago.) "No, no, we won't sell you our weapons!"

Now Coyote picked up a pot. It was an ordinary-looking black pot, but he sensed that there was more to it than that. "What is this?"

"That is just a cornucopia. We put leaves and twigs and other ordinary things into it and they turn into food."

In his heart, Coyote decided he must have this device. At this time there were many people in the world who did not have enough to eat and he felt sorry for them. Also, he thought it would make him rich. “What will you take for it?” he asked.

“We would like some land of our own,” the Star People said. “Someplace where we can build the kind of cities our people like to live in.”

“For this pot,” Coyote said, “I will give you the most valuable thing my people have.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“An entire continent, the site of our first great civilization.” Coyote showed them books and maps and other proofs. “We call it Atlantis.”

So the trade was made.

But when the Star People went to take possession of Atlantis, they found that it had sunk into the ocean long ago, or else it had never existed. Angrily, they confronted Coyote. “You tricked us!”

“Yes, that is true.”

“You cheated us!”

“Perhaps.”

“You lied to us!”

“No, for I said that I would give you the most valuable thing that we Mud People have. Has no one ever told you that we value dreams above all else?” Then, laughing, Coyote ran away.

So for a while, then, there was great prosperity on Earth. For the first time in history, all the world’s billions had enough to eat. And it was all because of Coyote.

### Coyote Changes His Sex

Coyote was never satisfied. If he sat near the fire, he missed the open air. If he walked the roads, he yearned for the comforts of a house. When times were good, he worried about inflation. When inflation was low, he wasn’t getting a good enough return on his investments. He was in a bar one night with a pretty girl on his lap, and he said to her, “Why should I buy you drinks when you never buy me any? It seems to me that women get everything they want just by being women. What do men get for being men? Nothing.”

“Being a woman is not so easy as you think it is,” the bar-girl said.

But Coyote did not listen. The Star People had a machine that for a few coins would change men into women and women into men. But it only changed their outsides—their faces and features and reproductive organs. Inside they were unchanged. He ran straight to the machine and it turned him into a very beautiful woman.

Back to the bar Coyote went. She met a man there and they decided to be married and live together. So they did.

The bar-girl was right. Being a woman was not so easy as Coyote had thought it would be. But she got used to it. Coyote was adaptable. She could get used to anything. So Coyote and Badger (that was her husband’s name) lived together for many years.

One day Coyote came home and found a woman there. Badger had gone to the machine and changed into a woman. "What is this?" Coyote asked.

"Oh, I'm just Badger. Now you have a wife instead of a husband, that's all."

"But what can two women do together?" Coyote asked.

"I will show you," said Badger.

After this, those two were always changing their sex. Sometimes they were two women living together. Sometimes two men. And sometimes one of each. They did this practically every day.

This offended the other Mud People. "This is not right," they said. "People should be one thing and never change!"

They came and burned down Badger's house and when Coyote and Badger came running out, they clubbed them to death. They did this everywhere. Many cities burned. Millions died, including many people who had never changed their sex even once. But the Mud People had no way of knowing who was what, so they just killed as many as they could.

But when the rioting was over, Coyote brought himself back to life. He picked himself up and dusted himself off, and trotted away, singing happily to himself. For in those days Coyote was still full of power, and all the world belonged to him.

#### Coyote Meets a Machine

Coyote was making worthless money. First it was made out of paper, and then it was made out of electrons, and finally it was made out of numbers that only he understood. You had to take his word that he had it, and then when you sold him something, you had to take his word that he had given it to you.

The Star People were used to plain dealing, and did not know how to respond to Coyote's deceptions. He sold them promises written down on paper. He sold them shares in things that did not exist. He used their wealth to build great projects. Yet somehow he always prospered, and they did not.

Finally, they decided to build a machine that would deal with Coyote for them. This machine looked like any Mud Person on the outside. But on the inside it was like Coyote. It was treacherous and deceitful and clever. It never told the truth when a lie would do.

Now at that time, there were no machines that could think. Only people could think. So Coyote was astonished to meet a machine as shrewd and devious as himself. He decided immediately to play some trick on it. That's how he was.

"I have some commodities futures I would like to sell you," he said.

"You will not fool me as easily as that," laughed the machine. "But I will happily sell you as many futures as you like."

"Perhaps you would like to buy a bridge?"

"From you? Never!"

"You are very clever," said Coyote wonderingly.

"I am your equal in all ways," the machine boasted.

“Oh no, you are not,” said Coyote.

“Oh yes, I am,” said the machine.

Coyote took his penis off and put it on the table before him. “Can you do this?” he asked.

“Yes, I can.” The machine took off his penis (it was made of metal) and set it on the table as well.

“Let’s see you do this.” Coyote detached his arms and legs and laid them down on the table before him.

“That is easy for me.” The machine took off his arms and legs as well.

Coyote took out his jelly-eyes.

The machine took out his machine-eyes.

“But you can’t do this.” Coyote took out all his inner parts, his heart and his lungs and his stomach and his brains as well and put them each separately on the table.

“Yes, I can.” The machine took all of his inner parts, his circuit boards and memory chips and wires, and put them on the table as well.

Then Coyote put himself back together (this is a trick he knew how to do), shook himself, and said, “Well, you have convinced me that you are as good as I am in all ways!” He scooped up all the machine parts and ran off with them. Some of these parts he put in his television set and others in his car and still others in his computer. Soon all his machines were as clever and deceitful as him. All of his schemes and plots worked better than ever and, for a time, he thrived as never before.

### Coyote and His Many Wives

In those days Coyote had many wives. He had wives wherever he went. In this way he never had to do his own cooking, and he never had to work for a living. His wives took care of all that.

One day, however, this all changed. Coyote was living with a woman named Sparrow. She had been working hard all day, while Coyote was drinking beer and watching sports on television. When she brought him food, he complained that it wasn’t good enough. When she asked for sex, he said he was too tired.

“I’ve had it!” Sparrow exclaimed. “You don’t work, and you don’t help with the chores, and you won’t keep your wife happy. I would be better off with no husband at all!”

Coyote was scandalized. “Do not talk like that,” he scolded. “You will bring bad luck.”

Sparrow, though, was adamant. She threw him out of her house. Then she called up all his other wives and told them of his behavior. They all hardened their hearts against Coyote. Wherever he went, his wives closed their doors to him. He had no one to take care of him, no one to feed him.

Finally, Coyote thought to himself, “I will go to the Star People and ask them for a machine to keep my wives in line. Surely this will be easy for them.” So he did that thing. But the Star People only laughed in his face.

“Who would make such a machine?” they asked. “What would be its purpose?”

But Coyote had been snooping around. Now he asked, “What is this little wand for?”

“Oh, it is a thing that if you point it at someone that person has to do what you tell them. We don’t know why we made it, though. It would be against our ethics to use it.”

When the Star People weren’t looking, Coyote stole the wand and slipped it under his coat. Then he went back into town to see Frog Woman, who was another one of his wives.

When she saw who was at her door, Frog Woman started to close it in his face. But Coyote pointed the little wand at her and said, “Let me in.” She stepped away from the door and he sat down on the couch in front of the television. “Bring me a beer,” he told her, and she did so. He told her to do many things during his stay, and always she obeyed him. Because he pointed the little wand at her.

Coyote returned to his old ways. Wherever he went, he pointed his little wand at his many wives and they did whatever he told them. So used to this did he become that when he went to see his wife Hummingbird, he forgot to point the wand at her. She opened the door and in he walked. “Get me a beer.” She did so. “Sit in my lap.” She did that too.

Hummingbird had heard from the other wives how Coyote had discovered a way to make them obey him despite their better judgment. So she toyed with his hair, and pretended to be in love with him, and got him to talking about himself. She was determined to get to the bottom of this mystery.

Pretty soon Coyote began to brag about how he had outwitted his wives. He told Hummingbird all about his wand. “Can I see it?” she asked. And when he showed it to her, she snatched it out of his hand and broke it into a thousand splinters. She threw the splinters out the window. She threw Coyote out of her house.

But Coyote went straight back to Sparrow’s house, where all the trouble began, and when she opened the door he just stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned at her. He was a good-looking man, was Coyote. So Sparrow took him in. Even though he didn’t have the little wand anymore, she still loved him.

But all the splinters of the broken wand were picked up, one by one, by folk who were passing by, and because they all had the same power as the wand, they caused much trouble in the world.

### Coyote Decides to Live Forever

Coyote was going to and fro. He had no purpose, he was just going. He saw Bear and asked him how things were going.

“Not so good,” said Bear. “These new folk” (he meant the Star People) “come in and take some land. Then there are more of them and they need more land. So they offer things no man would turn down for it. Little by little, they have taken all of my land and there is no place for me to be.”

“Huh,” said Coyote, and on he went. After a while he came upon Dragon and asked him how he was. Same story. “New Star People are born every day,” Dragon said, “but no one ever sees them die.”

“Fancy that,” said Coyote. On he went. Eventually he met Bulldog, asked him the same question and got the same answer as the others. “I think they live forever,” Bulldog said. “Somebody told me that they did.”

On hearing this, Coyote dropped all he was doing and hurried straight to New Home, which in the native tongue was called Toronto. “People say that you never die,” he said. “Is this true?”

“Yes,” the Star People replied. “We have medicines for that.”

“I would like some of those medicines, if you please.”

“They are too valuable to give away. The likes of you could never afford them.”

“Surely I have something that you need.”

“We always need land,” the Star People said. “But whenever we try to buy it from you, you cheat us.”

Coyote and the Star People sat down to bargain. The Star People bargained hard, for they had been fooled by Coyote many, many times. In the end, he gave them New England. He gave them Mexico. He gave them San Francisco and Seattle and the Gulf Coast and New York City as well. This is why there are no Mud People in any of those places today. One by one, Coyote gave the Star People everything he owned. For he thought, “Forever is a long time. If I live forever, there’ll be plenty of opportunity to trick the Star People into giving me these places back again.”

So it was done. The Star People gave Coyote the medicines to live forever, and he went up and down the continent, giving them to all the Mud People who would take them. This was almost everybody, for they all wanted to live forever.

But then a strange thing happened. Everywhere the Mud People began to die. They grew sick and they withered and died. Only those few who had not taken the medicines did not grow sick. Their numbers dwindled to almost nothing.

Coyote went to see the Star People. “Your medicines were supposed to make us live forever,” he said. “Instead, they make us all die.”

“It is not our fault,” said the Star People. “The medicines were perfectly good. How were we to know you didn’t have triple-strand DNA?”

“You have cheated me,” said Coyote. “Give me back all my lands and wealth.”

But when the Star People heard this, they grew angry. “How many times did you trick us?” they said. “You stole our technology and never gave us the land for it you promised. Now the shoe is on the other foot. There are many of us, and therefore we need the land. There are few of you, and therefore you don’t.”

So Coyote went away, sorrowing.

Since that time, there have been very few Mud People, and they have never been wealthy again. The world they used to own belongs today to the Star People, who take better care of it than ever Coyote had. Coyote himself is still famed in stories, but he is never seen walking up and down the Earth anymore, and nobody knows if he’s still alive or not.