

Plumage From Pegasus

by Paul Di Filippo

Two CC's of Bestseller, Stat!

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“Soon, Milwaukee-area book lovers needing to check their blood pressure or just wanting information on the latest health trends will be able to do so while picking up some new reads. Milwaukee’s Froedtert Hospital and the Medical College of Wisconsin will join forces this fall with the Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops in a unique collaboration to provide health information and resources to consumers. Founded in 2002, Small Stones Health Resource Center ... will move into a 3,800-square-foot space next to the Harry Schwartz Bookshop in Brookfield.... Small Stones will have a full-time nurse and other health educators on hand, as well as a resource library, screenings and classes. A retail area will provide health and wellness books, wellness journals, and other products for the health-minded consumer....”

—Claire Kirch, “Harry W. Schwartz Bookshop Healthy Place to Be,” *Publishers Weekly Daily*, August 15, 2006.

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That day at work, I was feeling a little under the weather—just a trace of flu, I hoped and believed, based on my red runny nose and scratchy throat—so I decided to stop by my local bookstore on the way home. I’d pick up a big fat juicy bestseller to while away any convalescence. And I could also indulge in a hot chocolate from the bookstore’s café. That would all certainly make me feel much better.

As I headed to the Brookfield mall, I realized that I didn’t go shopping often enough. I couldn’t remember the last time I had visited this Harry W. Schwartz branch. Living one’s life online had certain advantages, but there was nothing like good old-fashioned mingling with humanity in the flesh!

When I reached the entrance to the familiar store, I encountered something unexpected: an unusual kind of sensor gate on the order of an airport metal detector.

Some new kind of security or anti-theft measure, I thought, and walked on through.

But the gate beeped fiercely at my passage and I prepared for the descent of store guards, already phrasing my excuses and jokes about my innocence of shoplifting and the unwarranted sonic assault.

Instead, I was beset by two nurses! The white-clad, intensely competent-looking women swooped up on either side of me. They wore hygienic facial masks and latex gloves.

“Sir,” said one, “I’m afraid our instruments reveal that you’re carrying a communicable disease.”

All the other nearby patrons were looking at me and shying away. I felt immediately like a leper.

“Well, perhaps a touch of flu. My throat’s a bit raspy....”

“Sir, are you actually unaware of the new Schwarzenegger-Clinton Public Safety Act of 2007, which mandates that anyone wishing to utilize a commonly shared public space must possess a clean bill of health, as determined biometrically? Mutant tuberculosis alone last year accounted for ten fatalities among Harry W. Schwartz customers. If we permit you to infect your fellow booklovers, the annual bottom line of Harry W. Schwartz could be severely impacted.”

“I—I hadn’t heard anything....”

One nurse handed me a pamphlet. “Here are the details, sir.”

I studied the material—inside an invisible bubble of contempt maintained by my fellow book-browsers—before speaking.

“It seems I have only two choices. I can proceed straight home—”

“Your license plate has already been registered,” one of the nurses stipulated, “and you’ll be under constant automated satellite monitoring by GoogleEarth.”

“—or I can submit to treatment immediately.”

“So long as you have adequate healthcare insurance.”

“I do.”

“And do you wish to undergo treatment?”

“Well, sure, why not? I would’ve seen my own doctor sooner or later if I didn’t get better, you know.”

The eyes of the nurses managed to convey deep skepticism.

“I’m not a bad person, just a little out of touch.”

“We make no moral judgments, sir. Our concern is merely guarding the public’s health. Now, if you’ll come with us...”

The nurses conducted me behind the sales counter and through a door.

I found myself in what was obviously an infirmary. The nurses took my health insurance information and left me alone.

It was then that I noticed something odd about the room.

Although its tiled walls and easy-to-clean floor contained a paper-topped examining table for patients, it had none of the other accouterments of a hospital. No machines, and not even a canister of tongue depressors.

Before I could unriddle this lack, a doctor entered.

In his scrubs, the man was tall, thin, and possessed a mop of red hair that stood up like a cock’s comb. His face too was half-concealed by a mask.

“Dr. Gutenberg,” he announced himself. “Please strip to your underwear and climb on the table, so that we can begin your treatment.”

I started to unbutton my shirt. “But don’t you need to examine me?”

“Not at all, not at all. We have the readouts from the scanner gate. Your treatment is pre-ordained.”

Sitting in my boxers on the crinkly wax-paper, I watched as Dr. Gutenberg opened a cupboard door and removed—a book! He began to rip pages out of it.

“This is a first edition of Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*. Proven extremely effective against influenza. Effects of the pure Arctic landscape

described therein. Its cost will show up on your bill, under the 'drug' heading. Not covered by your insurance, I'm afraid."

I quailed at the destruction of the valuable book, especially since I knew what it went for online. "Wait just a minute. What kind of physician are you?"

"I am a doctor of bibliostetrics. Under the Public Safety Act, we have the federal franchise for all bookstores. Now, lie on your side."

Reluctantly, I assumed the required position. Dr. Gutenberg rolled up the pages of Jack London's book into a cone, inserted the narrow end into my ear—then lit the whole affair on fire!

"Hey!"

"Don't squirm, you'll negate the treatment! Surely you've heard of 'ear-candling.' An essential part of bibliostetrics."

I quit wriggling and allowed the procedure to finish. After turning over, I underwent the same procedure in my other ear.

"Feel all better?" asked Dr. Gutenberg as I sat up.

"Not one hundred percent...."

He cupped his chin and pondered. "We'll have to perform a papier-mâché full-body wrap. Take off your shorts."

I complied. The doctor secured and plugged in a little electric pot.

"Electric glue pot. From J. Hewit and Sons. By appointment to the Queen and all that. Top quality stuff. Just like this plough blade."

Dr. Gutenberg flourished a big wood and rubber spatula.

"Now, just relax."

In a short time I was completely coated with sticky, smelly paste from the neck down. Dr. Gutenberg began to rip pages out of a different book.

"First edition *Walden*. Guaranteed to restore complete health."

Soon I was immobilized like a mummy. Curiously, I began to relax

and feel better. Perhaps it was just the fumes from the glue pot. I drowsed off peacefully.

But I was jolted awake by waves of pain as Dr. Gutenberg ripped Thoreau's prose from my body! I screamed, and flailed about, accidentally grabbing Dr. Gutenberg's mask.

The naked face of the the "doctor" was immediately recognizable to me!

"You're Harry W. Schwartz the Fourth!"

"No, no, I'm Dr. Gutenberg—"

I climbed down off the table. "There's no such thing as the Schwarzenegger-Clinton Public Safety Act, is there? That entrance scanner is a fake!"

The mock doctor caved. "Yes, yes, I'll admit it! Sales were down at the store, and we came up with this scheme. The nurses are my nieces, and the contemptuous patrons were illegal immigrants hired from the Home Depot parking lot. And those weren't true first editions, just Weston Press reprints! Practically worthless, we get them for two dollars a carton."

Now the smell of the glue registered with me. "And this binder's paste is just melted brie!"

Harry W. Schwartz IV began to weep. "Left over from our last author signing! You won't press charges, will you? Milwaukee can't afford to lose another independent bookstore."

Picking off scabs of text, I said, "You realize that a lifetime supply of free hot cocoa is merely the beginning here."

Harry Schwartz IV smiled. "Wonderful. Take two free paperbacks and call me in the morning."