

Charles Beaumont: An Appreciation

An earlier version of this essay appeared in The Silver Web #7 (Fall/Winter issue; 1991)



Charles Beaumont...Charles Beaumont...

Wasn't he...didn't he...was he the guy who...

No, no, you're way off. Think classic television, think "The Twilight Zone".

Sure, "The Twilight Zone". *Doo doo doo doo*, right? Rod Serling, Richard Matheson—

--and Charles Beaumont.

Really?

Sure. I'll bet if you named four or five of your favourite episodes, one of them is bound to have been either scripted by Beaumont or based on a short story he penned. "The Howling Man", "Perchance to Dream", "Elegy" and "Long Live Walter Jameson" are the ones that come particularly to mind.

And if you require further evidence of Beaumont's influence on the series, allow me to draw your attention to Carol Serling's remarks in her preface to *The Twilight Zone: The Original Stories* (Avon Books; 1985):

"Several years later, when an Emmy Award was presented to Rod for the series, he said 'come on over, fellas, we'll carve it up like a turkey'. He was really referring to two 'fellas': Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont. In collaboration, the three of them produced over ninety-nine per cent of the work for the early years of 'The Twilight Zone'."

My own connection with Beaumont's writing goes back perhaps thirty-five years. I was in my late teens, browsing through a used bookstore in Regina (*The Purple Dragon*, on 5th Avenue, I have fond memories of the place) and came across two of Beaumont's short story collections, *Yonder* (Bantam Books; 1958) and *The Hunger and Other Stories* (Bantam Books/Putnam; 1958). These volumes were first editions, printed before he crossed paths with Serling, so there was no mention of *TZ*, nothing that would immediately draw my attention. But I snapped them up for some reason, likely getting my pal Stacey to front me a couple of bucks (I was chronically broke and a shameless moocher, as my friends will testify).

Later, after devouring the books, I found myself wanting *more*. I wondered what Beaumont had been working on lately. I'd made the connection, finally, with "The Twilight Zone" and set out to learn where his career had taken him since.

I did some research (this was pre-internet) and discovered an obituary for Charles Leroy Nutt (*aka* Beaumont). It said he had been struck in 1964 by "a savage illness which ravaged and eventually killed him".

But other than that, I could come up with little information on Beaumont, either in the main library downtown or its university counterpart. I was certain that a talent that remarkable and unique hadn't gone unremarked upon; there had to be reams of biographical data out there, I just wasn't looking in the right places.



What was it about Charles Beaumont's work that spoke to me personally? At that point in my writing life I was soaking up literary influences—Beaumont and Richard Matheson became two key trailblazers for the kind of material I was most drawn to: small, intimate, intense narratives that sometimes employed the supernatural but more often than not fell into the category of *psychological suspense*. Beaumont himself put it best, in his introduction to an anthology aptly dubbed *The Fiend in You* (Ballantine Books; 1962). In his view, the old bogeymen seem passé and almost comical and here's why:

"We've discovered a new monster, you see. He doesn't wear an opera cape or a shaggy shirt or a white bedsheet; he doesn't rattle chains or moan; he doesn't drink blood or sleep in a coffin; yet he is the most terrifying monster of them all.

He's called The Mind..."

Those words resonate with me to this day; certainly I keep them close to heart whenever I conceive a work that I know will take me into the Dark Country.

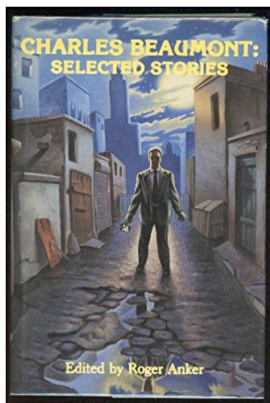
There's no use denying it, tales like Beaumont's "Miss Gentibelle" and Matheson's "Little Girl Lost" had a profound effect on me—they clearly inspired a number of my early stories and helped shape the way I approached my craft. Thanks to them and other efforts in that vein, I came to realize that the very worst, most amoral villains have all too human faces, and imbuing their evil deeds with otherworldly attributes only absolves them of guilt and, at least to some degree, expiates their sins.

I continued to actively seek out more of Beaumont's work, though until Roger Anker's critical and editorial efforts on Beaumont's behalf in the mid-1980s it was very hard to find much of his prose in print. I'd drop Beaumont's name in letters and conversations with fellow writers and horror fans, hoping to come across another admirer, perhaps even someone who'd known the man during his brief tenure on earth.

David Silva, publisher and editor of the now-defunct *Horror Show Magazine*, provided me with a great lead by putting me in touch with John Maclay. I can't say enough good things about Mr. Maclay. When I wrote to him about *Masques*, a book of macabre tales his company produced, he was nice enough to send me a signed copy from his personal collection. To my delight, *Masques* contained a wonderful retrospective on the life and work of Charles Beaumont by his long time friend Ray Russell, and a never-before-published autobiographical essay by Beaumont, titled "My Grandmother's Japonicas".

Masques helped fill in some of the blanks but I wasn't yet satisfied. Through bribery and extortion and downright chicanery, I managed to contact Russell and another old pal of Beaumont's, William F. Nolan. I may have fibbed a little by telling them I was working on an article on Beaumont (not true at the time), but I was rewarded when Nolan was kind enough to send me, *gratis*, a copy of his exhaustive bibliography of Beaumont, which turned out to be a key acquisition.

Mr. Russell, on the other hand, begged off, quoting the words of D.H. Lawrence: "Trust the tale, not the teller".



I did eventually get around to writing that article, the one that follows, but it sat in limbo at a certain small press magazine...and sat and sat and sat. Had it come out when it was supposed to, my little essay would have been an excellent companion piece to Roger Anker's Bram Stoker Award-winning *Charles Beaumont: Selected Stories* (Dark Harvest; 1987) and his comprehensive article on Beaumont, which appeared in the very last issue of *The Twilight Zone* magazine.

The Silver Web was good enough to rescue this heartfelt tribute from obscurity and for that I'll be forever grateful.

This one's for you, Chuck.

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Ray Russell called Charles Beaumont's life "incandescent" and certainly Beaumont's numerous credits--dozens of short stories and television and film scripts accumulated over a relatively short professional career--would indicate a fiery, relentless spirit, imbued with a enviable imagination. For the record, Nolan's bibliography lists 75 published short stories, 45 nonfiction articles, 12 screenplays, 38 teleplays...

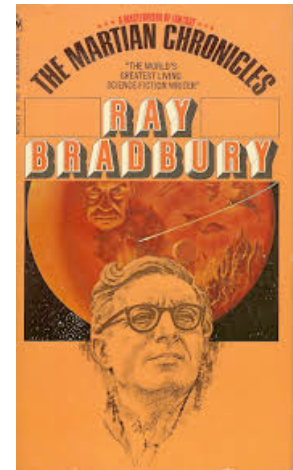
Not bad, considering all of it was produced between the years 1953, when a 24 year-old Beaumont took up full-time writing (he'd sold his first tale three years previously), and 1963, when his last story, "Mourning Song", appeared in *Gamma*.

Beaumont's typewriter ("the Torpedo", Ray Russell remembers, "built to take rigorous punishment"), was rarely silent during that time. Nolan recalled "the fast machine gun rattle of his typewriter as I talked to Helen in the kitchen while he worked in the den".

That restless energy was evident early on.

In 1946, when he was sixteen, Charles Beaumont met Ray Bradbury in a bookstore in Los Angeles. The two hit it off immediately. In his foreword to *The Best of Charles Beaumont* (Bantam Books; 1982), Bradbury writes:

“Our friendship leaned half in and half out of cinema long shots, comic strip surrealistic closeups, carnival magicians, old radio shows and longlegging it to ancient bookstores for a hyperventilating snuff of book dust. If I had allowed them, dogs might have followed me down the street. I didn’t know where I was going but it was sure great going there. Which is what dogs and budding writers are all about. Chuck was the same, save the dogs did dance about him and friends...too many perhaps. They used up his air. In the end, it might be true, he dispensed so much creative and conversational energy that there was nothing left over to fight any disease that chanced to dart in...”



It was Bradbury who instilled in Beaumont the work ethic that was to carry him throughout his apprenticeship and professional writing career. Bradbury urged him (challenged? goaded?) to write “one story a week for the rest of his life. And he had promptly, by God, done so.” Later in the Introduction, Bradbury calls Beaumont an “idea writer” and I think he sums up the allure of Beaumont’s prose when he points out: “You can tell his ideas to your friends in a few crisp lines. He is a story teller who weaves his stories out of those ideas, some large or, you may claim, predominantly small.”

Beaumont’s characters are recognizable and believable and consistent, but it is his ghoulish/great ideas that draw you back to his work time and time again.



When he is good—as in “Miss Gentibelle” or “Black Country”—he rivals even the Master himself, Richard Matheson. There are lesser efforts: “You Can’t Have Them All”, for example, seems dated and sexist today; readers employing contemporary sensibilities are sure to bristle at the way he handles some of his female characters. To my mind it is one of the few weaknesses this fine fantasist displays.

The vast majority of Charles Beaumont’s tales will thrill and delight aficionados of fantasy and horror. “The Jungle”, “Last Rites”, “The Vanishing American”, the hilarious “Open House” are superbly rendered tales. Beaumont’s spare prose, his love of twist endings and knack for creating nail-biting suspense made him an obvious choice when Rod Serling was scouting around for writers to get his fledgling series off the ground.

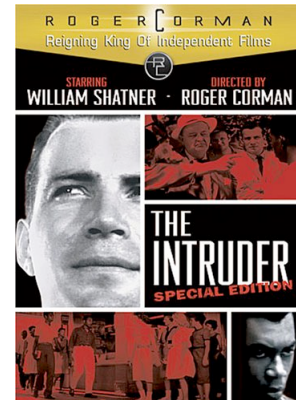
On November 27, 1959, Charles Beaumont’s adaptation of his short story “Perchance to Dream” aired on “The Twilight Zone”. Many more original teleplays and adaptations would follow (besides 22 episodes of *TZ*, he also wrote for “Route 66”, “Naked City” “Thriller” and others).

I have to agree with Stephen King, most *TZ* stories *are* pretty smarmy. However, in contrast to Serling-scripted efforts, which do tend to be maudlin and predictable, Beaumont’s offerings have a noticeable edge to them, a lean-ness and mean-ness that sets them apart.

TZ, thanks to its flexible premise, freed its writers of many of the constraints imposed by network television during the 1950s and 60s (indeed, many of those constraints persisted, in various forms, until the rise of cable TV). It permitted the show’s scenarists to make broad, moral statements on issues relating to race, mob mentality, prejudice in all guises. When it was at its very best—see: Beaumont’s “Howling Man” or Matheson’s “Mute”—*TZ* told an exciting, off-beat story, while opening up our souls to a thirty or sixty-minute examination. At its most self-conscious and pedantic, the series lectured hysterically, using dialogue that was, and I’m being kind, stilted, while featuring plots that were contrived, if not downright silly.

Charles Beaumont was well-acquainted with the region of inner space *TZ* occupied. Carol Serling remembers someone musing that Beaumont “actually lived in ‘The Twilight Zone’”. There is a humanistic aspect ever-present in his work: his stories and scripts are fraught with moral dilemmas and roads not taken. He presents his characters, warts and all, and allows them to choose their own fates—their downfalls, some funny, some not, are described with relish. He rarely allows a Bad Guy to walk away unscathed. If there is a crime, major or minor, there must be punishment. That is a given.

In the early 1960s, Beaumont’s career reached its zenith. He was writing for *TZ* and any other series that would have him, adapting his only full-length novel, *The Intruder*, into a film bearing the same title, (released by Roger Corman in 1962, starring William Shatner in his first leading role). Then there were his on-going collaborations with friends, his obsession with auto-racing, the constant demand for articles and short stories, so many assignments he sometimes drafted one of “the Group” into taking on some of the writing, splitting the fee with them...



“The future seemed so bright,” mused William Nolan.

Then...

...then...

Perhaps he saw it coming. That would explain why he drove himself so hard, writing as much as he could as fast as he could. The high-living, the house with the swimming pool, the specially blended peanut butter he loved, the spontaneous decisions to fly to Monaco for an auto race or explore Chicago's historic underworld with British author Ian Fleming...

In the summer of 1963, Beaumont started having trouble concentrating. There were memory lapses, scary incidents around the kids. Tests were conducted but it took specialists at UCLA to finally come up with a conclusive diagnosis.

Alzheimer's Disease.

According to one article I read, Alzheimer's is a "degenerative condition of unknown origin that results in a buildup of tangled fibres within nerve cells of the brain and scaly plaques between".

Its effects are swift and ruthless.



Beaumont's agile, tireless brain was shackled and tortured, his thoughts and perceptions scrambled. There were no more ideas and without them the stories would not come. With each passing day the dissolution of his senses was more complete.

But his friends never abandoned him, doing what they could to help and support the family as he slipped deeper into the grips of dementia, aging decades before their eyes. The authors of *The Outer Limits Companion* (Ace Books; 1986) report that Richard Matheson approached the producers of that series, offering to "ghost write" a script using Beaumont's name; the money was to be used to help defray some of Beaumont's medical bills. William Nolan and Jerry Sohl did likewise.

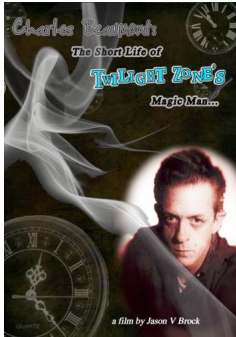
In March, 1965, Charles Beaumont, now a burden that not even Helen could bear alone, was placed in the Motion Picture Country Home and Hospital in Woodland Hills, California.

He died there February 21, 1967.

He was thirty-eight years old.

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Recent books and material relating to Charles Beaumont:



In 2009, Jason Brock at JaSunni Productions produced and directed “Charles Beaumont: The Short Life of *Twilight Zone*’s Magic Man”. Composed of interviews with Beaumont’s best friends and colleagues, it is a fitting introduction to his *oeuvre* and Brock is to be congratulated for assembling a stellar cast that includes Richard Matheson, Harlan Ellison, William Shatner, Roger Anker and Marc Scott Zicree. A valuable addition to dark fantasy archives. Copies are available through Amazon or by ordering directly from JaSunni.

Perchance to Dream: Selected Stories of Charles Beaumont (Penguin Classics; 2015)

A Touch of the Creature (Short Stories), Introduction by Roger Anker (Valancourt Books; 2015)

Running From the Hunter: The Life and Works of Charles Beaumont; Harold and Lee Prosser (Borgo Press; 2010)

Charles Beaumont: Selected Stories, edited by Roger Anker (Dark Harvest; 1987)