

MURDER
IN THE
GUNROOM

H. BEAM PIPER

MYSTERY
P6652MU

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H . B E A M P I P E R : A L I F E O U T O F T I M E

by
L. Fred Ramsey

"I don't like to leave messes when I go away, but if I could have cleaned up any of this mess, I wouldn't be going away."

—H. Beam Piper

H. Beam Piper wrote his suicide note sometime on the weekend of November 6th, 1964, covered the floor of his apartment with a dropcloth, and shot himself with a pistol from his collection. The note was typical of the man. Offering no excuses for his action, it was in fact an apology for obliging someone else to clear away a mess that he had made. This act of final dependence contradicted a life marked by an exacting adherence to self-reliance. Fear of that dependence led him directly to the place where he found himself that day twenty-nine years ago.

He was brought to this desperation by a life that had grown so financially bleak that he could no longer buy food. Piper found himself reduced to shooting pigeons by the river. He had been living from check to check for fiction sales without any cushion for the inevitable dry spells. The checks had simply stopped coming and he felt, in error, that they would never come again. Convinced that his career was finished and unable by temperament to ask for help, he took the only way out that he felt he had.

The financial problems began in 1954 with the collapse into bankruptcy of the national magazine distribution network. Many science fiction magazines simply disappeared overnight. Piper had never depended on writing for a living, but the sudden loss of most of his markets meant that he sold far fewer stories in the mid-fifties than he had earlier in his career.

In 1955, to the amazement of his friends, Piper married Elizabeth Hirst, a woman who worked in New York City. By all accounts, it was an ill-advised pairing. He was fifty-one, reserved, and accustomed to a solitary life. His diary entries reveal a man unsure of women and in general confused about relationships.

The financial demands of supporting a second person made selling fiction a necessity now, not something done for satisfaction. The markets

were very tight and sales were rare. Piper began to use some of his savings for living expenses.

It was the reorganization of the Pennsylvania Railroad which would provide the greatest financial disaster. Piper had worked for the PRR since he was eighteen. Beginning as a laborer, he had served as an engineer and then as a railroad detective. As a detective, he provided security on trains and for equipment belonging to the railroad. It was work that he enjoyed, not the least because he could do it armed with a favorite weapon.

Piper was laid off in 1956. Suddenly, he found himself unemployed and married. With no more work to be found in his hometown of Altoona, PA, the Pipers moved to New York City. He began to write full time while Elizabeth worked at the Council of Student Travel to support them. The market was still difficult. Piper was able to sell a few stories, but not enough to support two people. He had only ten sales to show for all of his work from 1957 to 1960.

The extraordinary stress had its inevitable result and the marriage ended. Piper moved back to Pennsylvania. He did not return to Altoona, but decided instead to live in Williamsport. His gun collection was on loan to the Lycoming Historical Society Museum in that city and he settled into local celebrity as the well-known science fiction writer.

After the expense of the divorce Piper found himself without any savings and with an irregular income. It became even more imperative for Piper to establish his writing career. This time he met with some measure of success, beginning with the publication of *FOUR-DAY PLANET* in book form in 1961. He began to sell to *Analog* again and to sell these serials in book form. He achieved a bit of financial stability at last.

His biggest success came from a book which both he and John Campbell disliked. The publication of *LITTLE FUZZY* by Avon brought Piper more recognition than any other book published during his lifetime. The book was a strong contender for the Hugo Award for 1962, but lost to Philip K. Dick's *THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE*.

LITTLE FUZZY sold well and Avon asked for a second book in the series, a first for Piper. Kenneth White, Piper's literary agent, was even able to sell film rights to the novel. His earnings at last becoming adequate for his modest needs, Piper was able to relax for the first time. His career now appeared established.

The success of *LITTLE FUZZY* must have seemed a cruel hoax as that career began to unravel in 1964. Avon published *FUZZY SAPIENS* as *THE OTHER HUMAN RACE*, an incredibly inappropriate title which ignored completely the tie-in to a strong contender for the Hugo Award of

the previous year. They slapped on a cover which was one of the worst in science fiction publishing history and were then shocked when the book failed to earn out its advance.

Piper had been asked to write a third *FUZZY* book for publication in 1965. Avon rejected the manuscript early in 1964 based on the poor sales of *THE OTHER HUMAN RACE*, leaving him with a completed but unsalable novel. No other market considered the project viable because it was based on a failed series. Even the film sale proved illusory when Ken White was able to collect only a portion of the advance.

Things were becoming more difficult by the day for Piper. He had wasted a lot of writing time on what he had thought was a sure sale to Avon. By mid-1964 he had managed to sell only the two *KALVAN* novelettes to John Campbell at *Analog*. Campbell requested a third *KALVAN* story which Piper submitted early in September. Then came a resounding silence.

Since Campbell had responded quickly to his submissions in the past, Piper assumed that his last market had dried up and that his career was over. In fact, Campbell had responded in his usual quick time with a letter full of the changes he was requesting, which he had sent to Ken White. Unfortunately, White died before he could pass it on to Piper and the letter was lost. The agent's business affairs were left in such a state of chaos that Piper was not even informed of his death until nearly two weeks after it had occurred.

When Piper finally wrote Campbell with the news of Ken White's death, he still did not know whether or not Campbell wanted to buy the story. Campbell replied that he had sent the letter to Ken White and that he could not remember the suggestions well enough to rewrite the letter. This news removed any hope of a quick sale and with the certain prospect of a winter without any income, Piper committed suicide a week later.

One of the legends surrounding Piper's death is that there was a large check for him sitting on Campbell's desk, waiting to be mailed. It is clear from correspondence that this was not true. *Analog* paid on acceptance and the third *KALVAN* story had not been accepted at the time of Piper's death. Campbell surely would have used the occasion of one of the letters in October to send any check to him had there been one for some other story.

Ironically, the man whom Piper thought had forgotten him, his new agent, Max Wilkenson, might have been able to get a check for him. In the short time that he had been agent for Piper, he had sold the three *KALVAN* stories to Ace Books as a collection. Tragically, he did not tell Campbell or

Piper immediately. Piper was left to believe that his life was a complete ruin, and Campbell was upset when the book and the third part of the series were published during the same month in 1965.

Why did Piper choose to kill himself rather than take some other less final action? Why didn't he sell his very valuable gun collection or ask for an advance against a future sale at *Analog*? Why didn't he borrow money from any number of friends who have said that they would have been glad to lend had they known of the desperate straits in which Piper found himself?

As he grew older Piper must have felt panic over the decline in his career and his finances. The fear that he might become dependent on a third party was very real to him and warred with his strong belief in self-reliance. Piper felt that no one was owed a living and that the government should not intervene in individual lives. He therefore would not have asked for help he did not believe was due him.

This pride would also have kept him from selling his gun collection. The humiliation of asking for the guns back from the historical society so that he could raise money would have been too much for him. He was, after all, a personage of some local stature and at this point in his seemingly failed career his local reputation was all that he had left.

In "The Last Cavalier," John F. Carr suggests that Piper may also have been despondent over world events and the state of the country. In letters and in his diaries, he worried constantly about the possibility of nuclear war. The defeat of Barry Goldwater in the presidential election held the Tuesday before Piper's death figured prominently in final diary entries.

A strong sense of melancholia and world weariness pervades his diaries. Even those written long before his death share in it. This coincides with the view of Piper as a classic Quiet Man. He was given to a solitary life, uncomfortable in large groups, agreeable in conversation, yet ultimately alone. He would not have asked for help because he would not have admitted to himself that it was there for the asking.

He also had a fascination with the inevitability of his own death. Diary entries suggest that suicide was not a sudden decision, but one that he had contemplated at other times in his life. John F. Carr quotes from an entry for mid-October, 1964, which reads in part, "This is carrying it about as far as I ever have." There is little doubt as to what Piper is referring to.

There is a certain inevitability in his books as characters meet fated action with foursquare self-reliance. His people know their place and act accordingly. H. Beam Piper thought that he knew his place as well. He chose to act on that knowledge.

Finally, reincarnation is a theme that runs through much of Piper's work. In his version, as you die you deliberately chose the destination life of your next incarnation. This is seen as a consciously controlled act. For such a practitioner, suicide would not seem so final. It might even be considered rational in the face of overwhelming odds.

Maybe, somewhere out there, a quietly intense man of about twenty-eight dreams of writing science fiction while he sits cataloging his gun collection. It would be nice to think so.

Piper was found early in the morning of November 9th in his apartment at 330 East Third Street in Williamsport, PA. He had been dead several days. Given the presence of the note and the general physical evidence, there was never any suggestion of foul play. As far as the Williamsport police were concerned, it was obviously a suicide.

Piper died without making a will. His father was long dead and his mother had died some years before. The only relatives were some distant cousins in Altoona. In legal terminology, he died intestate, without a legal will.

In Pennsylvania, when a person dies without a will, the county court steps in to manage the disposition of the estate. The register of wills appoints an executor, who is paid a fee to manage the estate and locate heirs.

In the case of the Piper estate, the search for heirs was complicated by the fact that he had no living close relatives. The more distant the relative, the more difficult it would be for the executor to determine precedence and to decide who was the legal heir. An executor is charged with making a good faith search for the nearest relative, a process that can take as long as the court deems necessary. Since Piper's living relatives were all distant cousins, the search would not necessarily have been an easy one.

An inventory of Piper's estate would have been complicated by the death of Ken White. The chaos in the agent's affairs would have added another layer of confusion to the determination of Piper's literary properties. Essential documents were likely to have been unavailable until White's own estate was settled.

An executor must also pay any claims that a creditor might have against an estate before any distribution of the estate can occur. In the case of the Piper estate this should have been relatively easy. Most of the outstanding debt would have been expenses arising from his funeral. The principal

difficulty would have been the lack of liquid assets. This would mean that all of the creditors would have had to wait for payment until the estate was liquidated.

Another of the legends surrounding Piper's death is that the funeral director became the principal beneficiary of the estate because he held a lien gained from the funeral expenses. It is true that he would have had a claim on the estate to recoup his fees and a negotiated amount of interest if the time waiting for payment was long. This, however, would have been his only claim. He would never have been entitled to the entire proceeds of the estate unless the sale of the assets did not cover his fees. This is unlikely because as tangled as this affair was, the literary properties would still be seen as having some value and there was also other personal property.

Given the complexities of the information-gathering process and the fact that no one was likely to have made much of a priority of settling the estate quickly, it is not surprising that it took ten years for the Piper literary estate to become available again. When it did become available, Ace Books bought all rights to the estate.

Ace then embarked on a program to bring all Piper's work back into print, beginning with *LITTLE FUZZY* in 1975. Over the next decade, they reissued six older books and published eight new ones.

The program was a success. The books were well packaged and the marketing was well done. Sales were helped a great deal by memorable cover art from Michael Whelan, then just beginning his rapid rise to the top of the science fiction art world. His vision of the Fuzzies was particularly well liked, with its wonderful combination of anthropomorphic sweetness and alien beauty.

All of Piper's novels, with the exception of *CRISIS IN 2140* and *MURDER IN THE GUNROOM*, were given new editions. The shorter fiction was collected in a series of four new books, each organized around a different aspect of the Piper universe. Two volumes, *EMPIRE* and *FEDERATION*, gathered the stories that were set within Piper's future history, the Terro-Human Chronology. *PARATIME* collected the shorter fiction from that sequence. And *THE WORLDS OF H. BEAM PIPER* assembled the fiction unrelated to any series. The books were edited by John F. Carr, who contributed excellent introductions to each book, placing the stories in the context of Piper's career and fictional universe.

In 1982, Ace published *FIRST CYCLE*, a "lost novel." Based on an uncompleted manuscript found among Piper's effects, it was edited and expanded by Michael Kurland. The manuscript was not intended to be

even a first draft, but rather background material and storyboard. There is little dialogue and the story is told rather than shown. It doesn't succeed very well as a novel, but as a glimpse into Piper's working method, the book is priceless.

Of course, the *FUZZY* books proved to be most popular. The Science Fiction Book Club issued *THE FUZZY PAPERS* (an omnibus volume with *LITTLE FUZZY* and *FUZZY SAPIENS*) which was then reissued in paperback by Ace.

The Fuzzies were so popular that Ace, in its capacity as owner of the Piper estate, commissioned authorized sequels to the books. The first, *FUZZY BONES* by William Tuning, succeeded in capturing the style of Piper's writing fairly well, but the gentle glow and intelligent discussion of the issues raised in the original novel were absent. *GOLDEN DREAM, A FUZZY ODYSSEY* by Ardath Mayhar, was a "further adventure" of the Fuzzies. The events depicted were tangential at best to the action of the other Fuzzie books and were at times at variance with the concepts that Piper had set up. Mayhar chose to concentrate on the warm "fuzzy" aspects of the story at the expense of narrative flow and examination of the issues raised. Ace even commissioned a children's book, *THE ADVENTURES OF LITTLE FUZZY*, which was written by Benson Parker and illustrated by Michael Whelan and David Wenzel. All of these books sold well.

Thus, there was great excitement at the 1983 World Science Fiction Convention in Baltimore when John F. Carr and Jerry Pournelle announced the rediscovery of the manuscript of the third *FUZZY* novel. *FUZZIES AND OTHER PEOPLE* had been thought destroyed with other papers that Piper had burned on the weekend of his suicide. The book proved to be less interesting than the first *FUZZY* novel, but fans were happy to have Piper's version of the trilogy at last. There was speculation at the time that the book was not complete and had been finished by a third party. On examination, however, the typed manuscript appears complete and only minor copyediting changes are evident. Indeed, Piper in letters and diaries clearly stated that he regarded the book as being finished.

The *PARATIME* stories had become almost as popular as the Fuzzies, so Ace authorized a sequel to *LORD KALVAN OF OTHERWHEN* as well. Piper had conceived these stories as open-ended, so the action of the sequel flows naturally from the ending of the original. *GREAT KINGS' WAR* by John F. Carr and Roland Green is easily the best of the authorized sequels. It succeeds in capturing both the style of Piper's narrative and the substance of his concepts.

In some ways it is a better book than the original. Since it was written as a complete novel, there is a stronger flow to the action. The authors also had the luxury of being able to do justice to the scope of the story. They did not have to cut the novel as Piper had been forced to do with the KALVAN stories so that they could fit into the magazine space available. A third KALVAN book was promised, but it never appeared.

With the publication of ULLER UPRISING in 1987, the Ace reprint program ended. ULLER had originally been part of a Twayne Triplet called THE PETRIFIED PLANET. The book was the first shared world anthology and was published in hardcover in 1953 with a small print run. A substantially shorter version of the novella was subsequently published in *Space Science Fiction* and had long been thought identical. The Ace edition restored the story to its original length.

For all the seeming success of the program, Ace has not kept the Piper books in print. There are no books by H. Beam Piper listed in the August, 1993 edition of *Books In Print Plus*. It seems ironic somehow that the only Piper volume in print should be this edition of the long out-of-print MURDER IN THE GUNROOM, his first book published forty years ago at the beginning of his career.

Piper's first professional writing came when he was twenty-three. His friend and mentor Lt. Col. Henry W. Shoemaker asked Piper to apply his considerable expertise in antique firearms to inventory the collection of Pennsylvania weaponry at Shoemaker's home, Restless Oaks, in McElhatten, PA. In the introductory essay to the catalog Piper produced of this collection, Shoemaker called Piper a young master of arms. The catalog shows a wealth of knowledge of weapons, history, and tactics. Essentially self-educated, Piper had a good mind unfettered by academic discipline. He displayed a love of obscure lore throughout his life.

The stay here would prove useful at a later date. One of the principal battles in LORD KALVAN OF OTHERWHEN takes place at a castle in the gap behind McElhatten. An active outdoorsman such as Piper undoubtedly would have spent time tramping the hills around Restless Oaks and the tactician in Piper would have seen the military importance of the site immediately. It would have been another obscure fact to inspire Piper's fertile imagination.

Piper would later repay the compliment given to him by the Colonel by dedicating his first book, MURDER IN THE GUNROOM, to Shoemaker. This was appropriate given that the mystery turns on the knowledge of antique firearms possessed by the detective, Jefferson Davis Rand. The book displays, perhaps to a fault, the full range of Piper's fascination with weapons.

Pierre Jarret, a character in the book, is a science fiction writer and his reply to a question from Jefferson Rand is often seen as Piper's assessment of his own career. "I do a lot of stories for the pulps.... Most of it's standardized formula-stuff; what's known in the trade as space-operas. My best stuff goes to *Astonishing*.... What I do for *Astonishing* is really hard work, and I enjoy it. I'm working on one of them now, based on J.W. Dunne's time-theories, if you know what they are."

This analysis applies surprisingly well to Piper's work. His best writing was done for *Astounding/Analog*. Piper shared a common viewpoint about man and his place in the scheme of things with editor John W. Campbell and was often seen as the carrier of the official Campbell philosophy. Piper was consistently one of the most popular writers in *Astounding* and one of the unanswered questions in his life is why there were so few sales to Campbell during the middle years of Piper's career.

Two of Piper's more popular novels first appeared serialized in *Astounding/Analog*. SPACE VIKING is a novel of war, revenge, destruction, and pillage. It is also Piper's most philosophical work. The lead character becomes through circumstance a man he does not want to be in a society which he realizes will soon collapse under the weight of its own failures. He finds himself forced to loot weaker planets to strengthen his own world against the coming crash. Piper drew on his extensive knowledge of medieval history for the pattern of the action.

The subtext of the inevitability of historical cycles—the rise and fall of nations—mirrors Piper's preoccupation with the fate of his own country. The vision is of a competent man compelled to use his talents in a manner utterly repellent to him, a strong example of Piper's own oft-stated philosophical conviction that a man should do what is necessary, not stand about and debate the issue.

LORD KALVAN OF OTHERWHEN was also about an extraordinary man who finds himself in a situation which requires quick action. The story centers around a small kingdom which faces destruction when it refuses to pay tribute to a larger power long used to obedience. The church maintains a monopoly on the technology of gunpowder and overwhelms anyone it sees as a threat. Calvin uses his superior knowledge and decisiveness to battle the monolithic threat. Piper's politics are showing again, but the rousing story makes the lecture palatable.

This use of a not-so-hidden political agenda is the mark of many stories from *Astounding/Analog* and Piper wasn't the only author of the day who used his fiction to fight the evils of the world. CRISIS IN 2140 presents its alarms against the growing illiteracy of the nation. A PLANET FOR

TEXANS issues the semi-satiric call to control politicians through institutionalized assassination. And JUNKYARD PLANET asks whether it is moral for a leader to lie to achieve a goal of common good.

Piper was at his best when he was able to submerge his politics in the action of the story. His chief virtue as a writer was a certain clarity of style which was remarkably free of artifice. He worked with a subtle directness and displayed a breadth of knowledge about the forces which shape and shake human societies. His celebration of humanity and its creations was part of science fiction's long love affair with the feeling that we belonged in the universe and that the universe belonged to us.

In many ways, Piper was a citizen of the nineteenth century. His belief in the exercise of individual power and responsibility was clearly at odds with the growing power of governments in everyday lives. He belonged in a less crowded and less complicated society where an individual citizen could expect to have a real effect on daily life of that society. In the end he truly was a man out of time.

With the obvious exception of this introductory material, this book is a true facsimile of the original 1953 Knopf printing of MURDER IN THE GUNROOM. The text, typographical errors and all, was shot from a pristine copy of GUNROOM. The covers are the original art, and dust jacket flap material has been carefully reproduced inside. Mary-Rita Blute and Michael J. Walsh of Old Earth Books felt it important to give Piper collectors the full book as it first appeared. I would like to thank them for asking me to be part of this project.

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