Damon Knight (1922-2002)

In an episode of the *Twilight Zone*, a domed, nine-foot-tall alien race arrives on Earth to promote exchanges with its planet. Humans are skeptical until a cryptographer translates the title of one of their books, *To Serve Man*; later, we learn the book is a cookbook. This episode was adapted from a 1950 story by Damon Knight, a prolific writer, literary critic, editor, teacher, and organizer who was once described as the Merry Prankster of science fiction.

Born in Baker, Oregon, in 1922, Damon Francis Knight grew up in Hood River, where his parents were school teachers. He once described himself as “mentally precocious and physically backward.” When he was eleven years old, Knight discovered the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories*, and he was hooked. He began a correspondence with other science-fiction fans, shared his own stories, and produced two issues of a fanzine called *Snide*, which he described as his “passport out of the Pacific Northwest.”

In 1941, after completing his studies at the WPA Art Center in Salem, Knight moved to New York to join the Futurians, one of several science-fiction fan clubs in the city. That year he also published his first story, “Resilience,” in *Stirring Science Stories*.

In New York, Knight supported himself as an editor for a series of magazines and, for a short time, as a television writer for the *Captain Video* serial. He also wrote many critical essays, arguing that science fiction was a form of literature that should hold itself to high standards of literacy. In 1956, he received a Hugo Award for his criticism, much of which is collected in the anthology *In Search of Wonder*. As an editor, he established *Orbit*, an anthology series of original science fiction that was published from 1966 to 1980.

Knight wrote over seventy short stories and twenty novels, many of which deal with humanity’s failing attempts to improve itself. He also translated French science fiction and wrote a biography of paranormal writer and science skeptic Charles Fort.

A teacher and organizer, Knight published *Creating Short Fiction*, a textbook for aspiring fiction writers. He founded the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1965 and served as its first president. In 1956, he co-founded the Milford Writing Workshop in Milford, Pennsylvania, and in 1968 he helped establish the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop, where he taught with his wife Kate Wilhelm until 1994.

Knight and Wilhelm married in 1963. They moved to Oregon in 1976 and settled in Eugene, where for many years they held a monthly writers’ workshop. Knight’s final work, on art history, was published in 2000 as an Internet book.

By most accounts, Knight was a provocateur. He once described another writer as a “pygmy who has learned to operate an overgrown typewriter,” and another as “credulous without limit." After his return to Oregon, he lamented that Oregonians seemed “bland, like tapioca.”

Knight died in April 2002. His papers, which include rough drafts, typescripts, correspondence, reviews, royalty receipts, tape recordings, cartoons, and index cards of research, are archived at Syracuse University.

Written by Edwin Battistella

Further Reading:

Knight, Damon F. *Charles Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970.

Knight, Damon F. *Creating Short Fiction* (3rd ed.). New York: Writers Digest Books, 1995.

Knight, Damon F. *The Futurians: The Story of the Science Fiction "Family" of the 30's that Produced Today's Top SF Writers and Editors*. New York: John Day, 1976.

"Damon Knight, 79, Writer and Editor of Science Fiction, Dies." *New York Times* April 17, 2002. http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/17/obituaries/17KNIG.html#.

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