

Jack Vance Sketch

The hills of Oakland lie about an hour to the west of San Francisco. If you make your way up the steep, eucalyptus-lined streets, and go to the right house, you will find a home built on several levels on the hillside. A large living room on the second floor has comfy chairs and sofas that look out from many windows, books taking all of the remaining walls, floor to ceiling, along with curiosities from around the world. An open kitchen is built behind an L-shaped counter... at second glance you see that it's a professional kitchen. An octagonal kitchen nook, paneled with real wood, holds a round table. The nook's windows look out over Oakland's hills. Here and there you can just barely see another home, down the slope of the hill, through the trees. It is a warm, inviting home. It is one of those homes which are instantly comfortable.

Guests will be greeted by the homeowner's wife Norma, a smiling white-haired woman with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. She will lead you upstairs from the entry, chatting as she goes about your trip, finding the house, and whether or not you are a bit hungry—would you like coffee? Her husband of many, many years is either writing a book, or sitting in the breakfast nook. If you find him in the kitchen nook, he might be listening to jazz, or *Scientific American* on tape. If he is writing when you arrive, you will hear a strange electronic voice from a downstairs room. (The man is blind now, so he types on a computer which echoes characters and words to him.) If he's writing when you appear, Norma tells him you are there and he makes his way up to the kitchen nook.

You will see an old man, heavy-set, in checked shirt and suspenders. Salt-and-pepper hair is receding from his forehead. He moves slowly, but he does not exhibit "blind-isms"--those strange head and eye motions of folk who are blind from birth. Instead, you will find a still-vital man, sitting upright, head held high. He will return your greeting in a strong voice, of interesting modulation and cadence. He smiles sometimes when he wishes to make a point, as though he is slightly diffident, but this isn't the case at all. He is neither infirm nor unsure of himself. He was once a very active man, who sailed, built boats, and--you discover--built the wonderful house in which you visit. He seems to have enjoyed his life and the people in it immensely. If you ask him a question about something which he did long ago, he raises his head slightly, and smiles before answering, as though he is remembering a pleasant event. (People who remember sorrow tend to frown a bit, look down, and might even lower their heads. I've never seen the man do that.)

The man you are meeting is 86 years old, and you are standing in the presence of one of the greatest imaginations of the 20th century: Jack Vance.

Jack Vance is blind now, but he has seen worlds which exist only in his profound imagination, far, far, even entire universes beyond the ordinary sight we take for granted. He hasn't written about these other worlds for us so much as he has just described his visits to them, and the interesting and curious people who live in them. What "rich and strange" places he has explored.

Much of his work is classified as *science fiction*, but the science fiction aspects are just a *decor* applied to the setting for his characters to play their parts. Sometimes he has written “mysteries” and yes, they are mysteries: but they unfold like events in real-life, not like some over-plotted British murder. And he has written fantasies, almost impossible to classify... worlds which seem to actually exist somewhere, someplace, sometime. (Critics sometimes claim that Jack has weak or non-existent plots. But in fact the action of his stories arises not from a plot, but from seemingly unconnected bits and pieces of life, which clump and mold together into a situation which has to be resolved. The plot is there... just like the plot in one’s own life... hard to see but running all of the time.)

In 1945, while serving in the Merchant Marine, he wrote his first story. Writing was what he wanted to do, and he has done it to the present day. Over the years he wrote more than 130 titles: short stories, novellas, books, and book series. And of course, over the years a large following came into existence, people who eagerly awaited anything new from Jack’s pen. In 1999 some 150 or so of these people used the Internet to begin a project to bring all of Jack’s work together in a single set of volumes—all 44 of them, 4 million words! Three years later the first 22 volumes of the Integral Edition of Jack Vance began to ship to over 500 readers. (The readers, by the way, were so anxious to have all of Jack Vance’s writings that they subscribed to the promises of unseen and unknown volunteers on the internet, plunking down \$350 to \$1000 for the privilege of a “guaranteed” set of the books.)

In 1999 I, along with another 8 or 10 of the first volunteers (from Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, and of course the US) of the newly-formed Vance Integral Edition traveled to Oakland, to propose actions, make plans, and to generally *effectuate* the publication of Jack’s work. We gathered at his home, and formed our management, obtained Jack’s authority to proceed, and generally got to know each other a little better than just letters on a computer monitor.

Many things needed to be done. First, the works had to be collected together, and converted to electronic format. This meant that some works were scanned, some were hand-typed. A few of the later works were already available electronically. Then we set out to undo the effects of many editors. Editors have almost total discretion over changes to a manuscript. Some editors respected Jack’s style, others insisted on adding and removing commas and other punctuation. One editor interchanged the order of chapters of a book, and added a “bridge” paragraph to “make it work.” Another editor, unhappy with the ending of a story, fabricated an entire final chapter in which a realistic separation at the end became literally “married and happy ever after.”

Spelling was repaired--but Jack has his own conventions. For example, a man may be a *blond*, but a woman with light yellow hair is always a *blonde*. And if a story takes place in the British Isles, the *colour* gray may appear as *grey*. Sometimes both spellings appear, in the same work. Says Jack, to his editors, in a letter:

...for you to wave in front of your proof-readers, stating: "Vance is a frightful curmudgeon; he thinks his writing is revelation from heaven. He points out that the rabbis don't go proof-reading and fiddling with the Dead Sea Scrolls, and that he doesn't want any similar underlings messing with his stuff, either."

Mention this as well: "Jack Vance adjusts the punctuation in his stuff like a skilled mechanic tuning up a Lamborghini Grand Prix race-car. He examines each colon and semi-colon separately for quality and throws back the rejects."

"The same cautions apply to his spelling, word-usage, and nomenclature unless the occasion is clearly a typo. Hyphens are more 'off-world' and 'off-worlder'."

In regard to spelling I am inconsistent, and in fact see no particular imperative for consistency, in any case. I tend to use the spelling which seems to accord best with the mood of the sentence and attendant circumstances. It is a most complicated business, Glamour, honour, armour all must use the u; color sometimes, and maybe some of the others. But they do not have to be all one way or all the other; this is pedantry.

To repair the damages done by the pedants, the volunteers examined multiple editions of each work, manuscripts when available, and when necessary, asked Norma or Jack for a "final word". In each work, every discrepancy was noted, discussed, and resolved. (There's a sample attached.) None of this would have been possible without thousands of hours of work by dedicated volunteers.

This effort, to restore the life work of an artist in words, is unique to publishing. Without the Internet, there would have been no practical way to join and co-ordinate the efforts of so many people over the entire world. And without volunteerism, there would have been no possible way to finance the undertaking.

Back at Jack's kitchen table, one cannot help but like the man. He has a store of stories, some of which involved many better-known authors. Frank Herbert was a good friend of the family. The Vance photo album shows Frank cutting the hair of his son Brian (an author himself) while Brian, age three, cries and tries to escape. Of Herbert, Jack smiles and says, "that Frank... he only came around when he wanted to cage a meal. That was before they bought his book for the movies." Flipping through the Vance album one finds others: Poul Anderson was a good friend, Robert Silverberg still drops by.

(One night while the VIE crew were assembled at Jack's home, Robert Silverberg and his wife dropped by. His wife told me, amused, that Bob was a bit put out: it was not at all usual for him to be in the presence of 20 or so science fiction readers and not be the center of attention.)

Jack spends some time talking about current affairs, and the difficulty of getting things published the way one might want. And of days gone by now, visiting far places where publishers wanted him to speak, or just visit... Eventually, Jack says, "well, I think I

should go back to work now” and makes his way back downstairs, to his computer in a small darkened room, from which he sees and illuminates entire new worlds.

Bob Lacovara

Houston, Texas
September 2, 2002

And Hammonton, NJ
October 23, 2006

And Afton, Virginia
July 5, 2007

Norma is gone now, I’m afraid. And Jack is somewhat older than when I wrote this in 2002, but still talks to his friends.

Afton, Virginia
March 13, 2011