



## **Alchemy and Academe : A Collection of Original Stories Concerning Themselves with Transmutations, Mental and Elemental, Alchemical and Academic**

*Anne McCaffrey (Editor) , John Updike (Contributor) , Sonya Dorman (Contributor) , Carol Emshwiller (Contributor) , R.A. Lafferty (Contributor) , L. Sprague de Camp (Contributor) , Norman Spinrad (Contributor) , Samuel R. Delany (Contributor) , more... Daphne Castell (Contributor) , Joe L. Hensley (Contributor) , Avram Davidson (Contributor) , James Blish (Contributor) , Joanna Russ (Contributor) , Betsy Curtis (Contributor) , Robert Silverberg (Contributor) , David Telfair (Contributor) , Gene Wolfe (Contributor) , Virginia Kidd (Contributor) , Keith Laumer (Contributor) , Josephine Saxton (Contributor) , Peter Tate (Contributor) ...less*

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An enchanting collection of tales, enchantments, things magical and strange, devils and demons, professors of potent powers, witchcraft and wizardry, and more. Master fantasy writer Anne McCaffrey has chosen 20 short tales and poems of wonder and awe, written by the finest writers of fantasy today, including Robert Silverberg, L. Sprague de Camp, R. A. Lafferty, Gene Wolfe, Carol Emshwiller, Sonya Dorman, and others.

**Contents:** Foreword / Anne McCaffrey — The dance of the solids / John Updike — A mess of porridge / Sonya Dorman — The Institute / Carol Emshwiller — Condillac's statue / R. A. Lafferty — The sorcerers / L. Sprague de Camp — The weed of time / Norman Spinrad — Night and the loves of Joe Dicostanzo / Samuel R. Delany — Come up and see me / Daphne Castell — Shut the last door / Joe Hensley — Big Sam / Avram Davidson — More light / James Blish — The man who could not see devils / Joanna Russ — The Key to Out / Betsy Curtis — Ringing the changes / Robert Silverberg — In a quart of water / David Telfair — Morning-glory / Gene Wolfe — Ascension: a workday arabesque / Virginia Kidd — The Devil you don't / Keith Laumer — The triumphant head / Josephine Saxton — Mainchance / Peter Tate

## **Alchemy and Academe : A Collection of Original Stories Concerning Themselves with Transmutations, Mental and Elemental, Alchemical and Academic Details**

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# **From Reader Review *Alchemy and Academe : A Collection of Original Stories Concerning Themselves with Transmutations, Mental and Elemental, Alchemical and Academic* for online ebook**

## **Adobe says**

Anthologies are a crapshoot: you rifle through a grab-bag of short stories organized around an ostensible theme, hoping to find a couple good stories and maybe an author to investigate further. If you're lucky, the editor is friends with good writers and has a clear conceit in mind. If you're unlucky, you get a book like *Alchemy and Academe*, which muddles along on mediocre stories and an inexplicable theme. *Alchemy and Academe*? According to McCaffrey's fulsome introduction, these stories are all about an intellectual/technical approach to fantasy and transmutations thereof. To make matters worse, she's taken a poem by John Updike (a poet whom other poets giggle about) as her guiding principle.

But anthologies are a crapshoot, even anthologies born under an unlucky star. *Alchemy and Academe* has two stories which redeem its ill-begotten existence: Samuel R. Delany's wonderfully creepy "Night and the Loves of Joe Dicostanzo," and Gene Wolfe's haunting "Morning-Glory." (Gosh, I sure hope those two gentlemen went on to write other stuff!)

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## **Theresa says**

*Alchemy and Academe : A Collection of Original Stories Concerning Themselves with Transmutations, Mental and Elemental, Alchemical and Academic*

McCaffrey, Anne

this book is a collection of stories by writers edited by anne Mccaffrey

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## **Sara Norja says**

This anthology didn't contain nearly as much fun stuff involving actual alchemy as I'd hoped for, which was disappointing. Also, most of the stories were just really bad. Pretty much the only redeeming feature was Joanna Russ's story "The Man Who Could Not See Devils". I will admit I skimmed/skipped some of the stories because they were just so bad.

SFF has got SO MUCH BETTER in the decades since the 1970s...

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## **gremlin says**

Just didn't enjoy the selected stories.

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## **Amanda says**

read about half of the stories. found them mostly hard to follow. i felt like the story started in the middle w/o really introducing the characters or the setting and just as I was starting to get a handle on what was going on, the story would end.

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## **M— says**

Forgettable.

I found a copy in a used-book store, and the friend I was browsing it with tried to dissuade me from purchasing it because, and I quote her, "It's not very good." I should have listened to her. I ended up selling the copy back to the store.

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## **Edward Gold says**

I've been doing a lot of short story reading lately to try to hone my own ability more. This collection of short stories and poetry did not impress me much. I only liked one story a lot and one a little bit. The rest I did not care for, including the one by Robert Silverberg, which was a surprise indeed. I normally like all his stories.

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## **Pietro says**

A mixed bag, but some gems within.

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## **Becca says**

I read the first few stories, but then had to return the book to the library. I'll probably take it out again in the spring semester, but I'm in no particular hurry.

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## **Nicholas Bobbitt says**

Excellent collection that I would love to keep on my shelves.

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## **Sam says**

Interesting collection, somewhat dated, but definitely worth a bargain bin purchase. Best line that stuck with me was the description of the Bishop's wife in the story "In a Quart of Water": "She reminded me of an

untidy and harassed chipmunk, without a chipmunk's charm."

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### **Aelvana says**

For a short story collection that pompously titles itself "Alchemy & Academe," there are surprisingly few stories about alchemy or academy. Most of this collection is closer to fantasy-horror, with quite a few tales of the devil thrown in for good measure. There are a few poems and a number of stories; due to the volume I'll only mention the standouts.

The best story of the collection is "The Man Who Could Not See Devils" by Joanna Russ. In a world where everyone can see devils and angels, the one man who can't finds himself the target of his family's crusade to exorcise him back to normal. The nameless main character vents his bitterness against his family in a number of ways, and the end pays out another surprising twist with a satisfactory conclusion.

"Mainchance" by Peter Tate, the final story in the volume, is also worth a mention as one of the few both compelling and within theme. In the not-so-distant future, humanity has subjugated itself to a computer in order to preserve peace. I felt the barrage of quotes detracted from the overall story, but it raised a number of interesting questions about life, faith, biases, and the individual versus society, and how much of knowing is recognizing what we do not know.

Along with those two, however, were a number of stories that were either decently written but boring or just badly written. I don't much care for poetry in any case, and found nothing worth remembering about any of the poems. The quotes on the top of each piece had little to no connection to the actual story. "More Light" by James Blish is worth a special nomination for mediocrity, because it is a great deal of buildup for an extremely tepid horror story.

I had been hoping for more stories about magical school settings, or at least a more scientifically-minded view of magic, but in the end there was little to differentiate this from any other volume of fantasy short stories save the lack of swords to accompany the sorcery. Overall I would reread the two I liked and happily never touch the rest of the book again. I rate this book Not Recommended.

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### **Mandy says**

An interesting collection of stories. Some of them were pretty impressive, but the bad ones outweighed the good by a little more than half the selection. It might be a useful read for someone looking for a wide variety of short stories to read. It may also be useful for someone looking to have a wide variety of writing and construction styles in one place without the tedium of a textbook.

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### **Roxanne says**

I'd read this one so long ago, I'm guessing at the date.

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## Mike says

I've set myself a goal of reading a collection of short stories each month this year, picking one to analyse, and writing a short story using what I've learned. This is the first anthology I chose.

I did so because I vaguely remembered that it had an excellent story in it, from when I read it many, many years ago. However, I think I must have been confusing it with another collection (possibly McCaffrey's own single-author anthology, *Get Off the Unicorn*). For the most part, despite the prominent names in the bylines, I found these stories dull, muddled and pretentious, self-consciously transgressive (*Dangerous Visions* came out around the time the call for contributors for this one went out) and without much in the way of structure or direction. Since story structure is exactly what I'm trying to study, this was the wrong anthology for my purposes.

I was surprised in the Samuel Delaney story to see the word "proscribed" used when the author meant "prescribed" (the two words have opposite meanings). It's not beyond the bounds of possibility that this was originally correct and was changed by McCaffrey, who was a shocker for homonyms, but it's a glaring error in either case. Otherwise, I only noticed a couple of minor typos.

I'll say a little about each of the stories now (omitting the poems). The theme was magic and academic institutions, which these days immediately makes us think of Harry Potter, but this was 1970 and he was still far in the future.

Sonya Dorman's "A Mess of Porridge" depicts the advent of a six-year-old girl to a remote university staffed mostly by old men. It's a slice-of-life story showing the ineffectuality of the academics and their habitual indecisiveness, and was very mildly amusing.

Carol Emshwiller's "The Institute" concerns an educational institution for old ladies. It doesn't go anywhere I found particularly interesting, and isn't so much a story as an exploration of thoughts.

R.A. Lafferty's "Condillac's Statue" is political, reflecting on revolution, property and philosophy. It had a bit more story, but the story was mainly an excuse to talk about the ideas.

Norman Spinrad's "The Weed of Time" has a basic premise (a drug which, when ingested, changes the perception of time so that the user is simultaneously aware of every moment in his lifetime, and always has been) that is explored in far too many repetitive words, again without much attempt at story. There are events, but rather by the nature of the idea there isn't a beginning, middle and end.

Samuel R. Delaney's "Night and the Loves of Joe Dicostanzo" also has events, but there's a kind of dream logic going on, and the story is incoherent and inconclusive. Everyone is desperate and alienated, and it's all beautifully portrayed but ultimately pointless.

Daphne Castell's "Come Up and See Me" was the first story I started skipping through, and the second (after the Emshwiller) that I had to look up to remind myself what it was about in order to write this review. It's weird horror of a sort, full of one-dimensional characters with no agency.

Joe Hensley's "Shut the Last Door" I also skipped through. Kid dealing with poverty and disability discovers he can kill people by hating them. Decides he has to hate himself in case he accidentally destroys the world. It's a *Twilight Zone* premise, but the execution bored me. (I had to look that one up too.)

Avram Davidson's "Big Sam" has a more conventional story structure, though I again needed to remind myself of what it was about. Couple meets and marries in a small town. He has a secret. The secret is revealed at the end, and isn't terrible.

James Blish's "More Light" hooks onto Lovecraft, quoting from some fictional letters that he wrote to one of the characters. There's a play that another writer associated with Lovecraft wrote, a piece from within that other writer's fiction that he took the time to create in full but never published, and Lovecraft forwarded a copy of it to the narrator's friend many years before. Though the narrator keeps pointing out that it's not very good and is very much of its time, it nevertheless has a sinister effect when read. Not a bad story, but the matter-of-fact modern setting and language (and the narrator's skeptical and critical attitude) rather work against the concept.

Joanna Russ's "The Man Who Could Not See Devils" is one of the best stories in the collection, in my opinion, though you'll have gathered that this isn't a high bar. Young man is unique in his culture in that he can't see (or be affected by) the supernatural, and therefore isn't afraid to go out at night. He's recruited by a group of thieves. Closing, anachronistic reflection, by him (he's the narrator), about how natural selection may lead to his (dis)ability spreading through the population in the future until nobody can see the supernatural and it's regarded as legendary.

Betsy Curtis's "The Key to Out" is a dimension-hopping bar story. Not a bad piece of play with the concept of being able to switch with alternate-reality versions of yourself.

Robert Silverberg's "Ringling the Changes" I had to look up to remind myself, though it is one of the more successful stories. The premise is recreational body-switching, by technological means, and it's not really a fit for the theme except by stretching definitions to their breaking point. There's an accident, and it's no longer clear which people belong to which bodies. A middle-aged man weary of life switches through several bodies and gets bits of their memories, vivid vignettes in the Silverberg style, and decides to stay in the body of a young man who is dying. It's stronger than most of the others not only because of the vigorous writing but because the character acts as a protagonist (albeit a world-weary one) rather than just experiencing some odd events.

David Telfair's "In a Quart of Water" I had to look up. It's literally about alchemy, turning lead (and other metals) into gold. The characters are either cynical and alienated or idiots, which doesn't make them appealing, the strange events are never explained and there's not much protagonism.

Gene Wolfe's "Morning-Glory" I remembered the idea of, but not the point. There wasn't much point, which is probably why. Professor takes drugs (morning-glory seeds), it changes his perception to be more like that of the plants he experiments on. I never have understood, or liked, Gene Wolfe's stuff, and this is no exception.

Keith Laumer's "The Devil You Don't" is a problem story, more in the older style of writers like Murray Leinster than the New Wave style of most of the rest of the contributors. It has a lot of playful foolishness about morality and Lucifer being misunderstood and misrepresented, which is not directly relevant to the problem part of the story: alien demons are invading Hell, more or less. The problem is solved in a way that the reader couldn't have predicted, basically using handwavium, so there's not a lot of protagonism here either.

Josephine Saxton's "The Triumphant Head" is about an alienated woman getting herself ready in the morning and her struggles with identity. I had to look it up to remind myself. It isn't necessarily spec-fic at all, and it



didn't do anything for me.

Peter Tate's "Mainchance" I skimmed a bit. It's about a rather unrealistic future setup in which, after a resurgence of nationalism, to keep the world from destroying itself people have to come together and build a computer to keep things in order. A man is appointed to liaise with it and watch over it, and discovers that it's a tyrant and is being opposed by the few remaining religious people (religion having withered in a rationalistic environment). There are echoes of Babylonian mythos and Biblical mythos and it's a bit of a mess in which it's not really clear what the author thinks or what is true, but seemingly it's about... human self-determination? Or something? It needed a thorough rewrite for clarity, which might also have reduced it in length.

Don't misunderstand me: I'm very grateful to the writers of the New Wave, who opened up speculative fiction to telling stories about people and the human condition, rather than just about engineering. But all too often, they fell into a would-be literary fiction mode in which alienated nobodies drifted through incomprehensible situations without knowing what they wanted or making any decisions, and this collection has too much of that for my taste. I much prefer characters to be disturbed, but engaged: to perceive that something is wrong with the world and to want to do something about it.

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