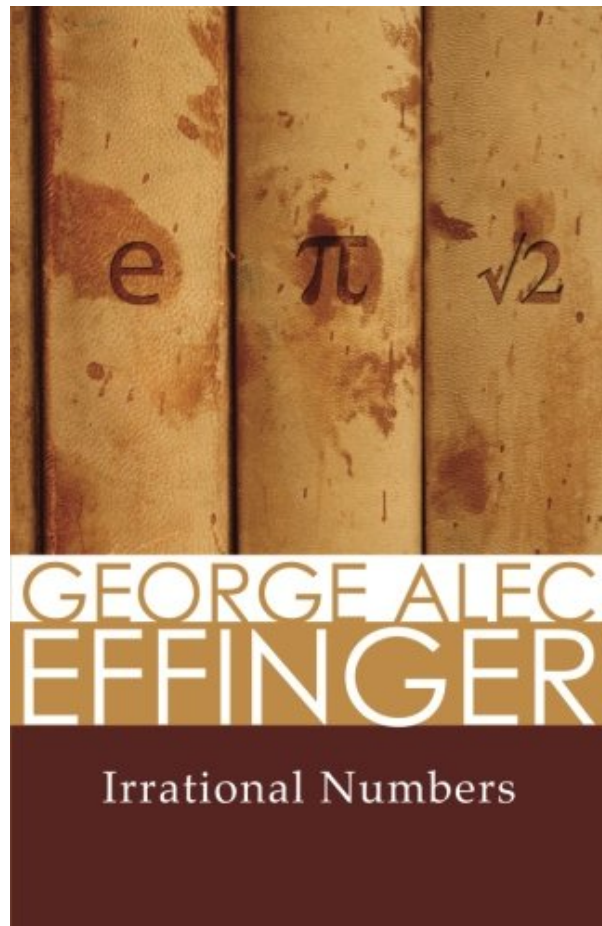
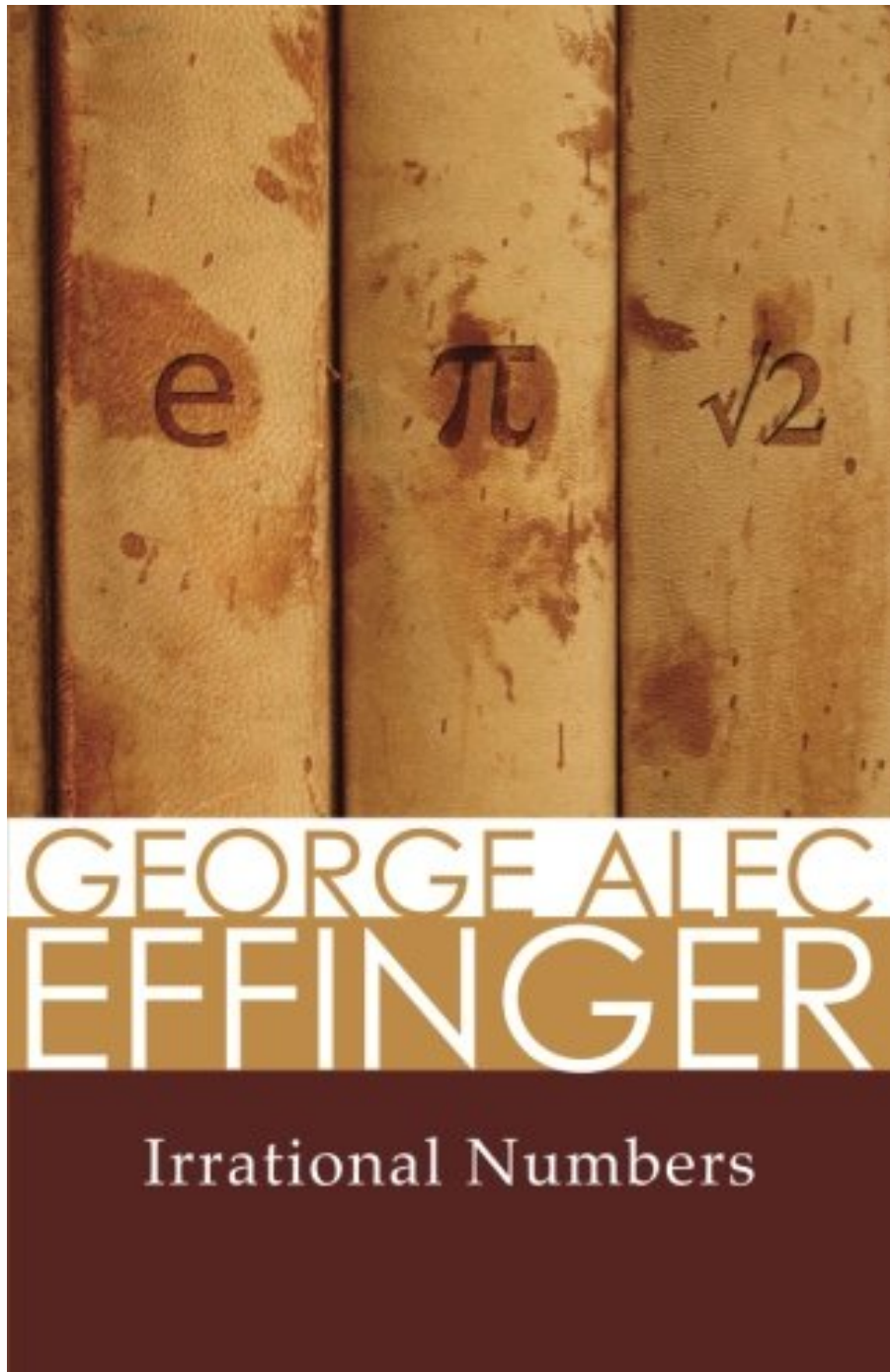


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About the Author

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The death of a pet fish signals an ominous threat of worldwide tragedy... Delta Company “plays” out a war light years away... A running back for the Cleveland Browns gives his all to relive a night from his past...

In *IRRATIONAL NUMBERS*, as with much of his work, author George Alec Effinger straddles the line between allegorical fantasy and science fiction. It's a vein Effinger mines for a deep, meaningful understanding of human nature. Challenging and disquieting in the way only the best fiction can be, this collection of eight magnificent pieces of fiction will have readers clamoring for more.

George Alec Effinger was a true master of satirical Science Fiction. Before his death in 2002, he gained the highest esteem amongst his peers for his pitch-perfect stylistic mimicry and his great insight into the human condition. Despite a life filled with chronic illness, Effinger was a prolific novelist and short story writer, earning multiple Nebula and Hugo Award nominations.

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8 short stories, some with a horror spin

By Michele L. Worley

Effinger passed away in April 2002. He was at one time married to Barbara Hambly, and they remained good friends; she's mentioned that she plans to complete at least one of the projects left unfinished at the time of his death.

All the stories herein first appeared between 1973 - 1975; this collection first appeared in 1976. The only conjecture I can offer as to why it became hard to find in Effinger's lifetime is that while the stories are all

excellent, they're mostly disquieting as well.

"And Us Too, I Guess" first appeared in the anthology *_Chains of the Sea_*. The viewpoint alternates between the 1st person narrative of Dr. Davis, a scientist, and the 3rd person narrative of Paul Moran, a factory worker. Both men have unsatisfactory lives. Davis is rebuilding his career - not for the first time - after a disaster (apparently) not of his own making. Moran, on the other hand, definitely has a hand in the making of his own disaster: his unsatisfactory marriage.

Neither man knows the other, but they share a common passion: breeding mollies, a particular breed of tropical fish. On the day the story opens, both find that all their pets have died - and upon seeking replacements, that **all** mollies everywhere appear to have died in a single night. Then a few days later, another species - an obscure fungus - is found dead, and an ominous pattern of tragedy begins to unfold.

"At the Bran Foundry" first appeared in *_New Dimensions 3_*. The annual Key Club outing - 18 teenagers with 2 fathers along, narrated by one of the boys - may first seem to have fantastic elements only in that 1) fathers, not mothers, are acting as chaperones, and 2) the kids are holding still for a tour of the Jennings Raisin Bran Corporation. But anomalies appear thick and fast as the lecture rolls on, both in the things we see, and those we don't.

"Biting Down Hard on Truth" first appeared in *_Orbit 15_*. Mac, Willie, and Sam (Sam's Willie's wife) are the three protagonists, as 3 of the many people in a giant institution whose purpose is unclear even to them, let alone the reader. It's hard to tell at first whether this is an alternate history - the religion is Mithraism, but modified to allow female participation - or the future. Jennings, the mysterious figure who coaches sports, leads religious rituals, and lectures on various military topics, appears to be the one constant in their lives - at first.

"Curtains" first appeared in *_The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction_* (MFSF), August 1974, and appears to have the same setting as *Lydectes* (see below). Delta Company is a troupe (**not** troop) of soldiers on the battlefields of a future war arranged by the Representatives of Europe and North America, where "theater of war" takes on an entirely new spin, and a unit's reviews by the official critics are its first concern.

"Hard Times" first appeared in *_Amazing Science Fiction_* in 1973. Justin, having applied for a lowly office position in Federal Services, is undergoing a battery of psychological tests, but he isn't filling out forms. Instead, a la the Matrix, each test puts him into a dreamworld he can't distinguish from reality - drugged so that he doesn't remember it's a test - to see how he reacts.

"How It Felt" first appeared in *Universe 5*. As the only person left with true feelings, Vivi is set apart. Her friends, however, are driven to appalling lengths to seek diversion, and often seek it by gauging **her** reaction to their actions. Today, however, she's attempting to create a more sophisticated veneer, and isn't providing her usual satisfactory responses.

"Lydectes: On the Nature of Sport" (1975) My first reaction: 'Hmm. The title sounds like a philosophical essay by a classical author; should I know the name?' As it happens, the text appears at first to be exactly that sort of essay - but it was found in a sealed capsule among some ruins on Wolf 359, Planet B, and for reasons that become apparent as the story unfolds, the dictator of North America found it important enough to forward to a colleague, with his own chatty annotation weaving in and out of the text - which also reveals that he and his colleagues are on the brink of war. (The essay, incidentally, is much more readable than Plato in English translation.)

"25 Crunch Split Right on Two" (MFSF, April 1975) MacDay's working life as a running back for the Cleveland Browns is spent translating such cryptic jargon into plays. But his coaches and fellow players don't know that what motivates him to try his hardest this year is that sometimes, when he's hit hard enough under just the right conditions (he's still working out what they are), he has flashbacks to a night five years ago: a night out with his wife, who died not long afterward. He'll pay whatever price he can even to see her again, but if he can change what happened...

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Effinger at his best

By Mithridates VI of Pontus

George Alec Effinger's short fiction holds great allure—he tackles a vast variety of subjects and themes: trauma, commercialization, sports, and biological apocalypse are paired with the daily experience, the mundane. Interested in SF about a man obsessed with his fish tank confronting his disintegrating relationship and the end of the world? A regimented cult, or psychological experiment (?), organized around Mithraic ritual and the memorization of arms manuals? If so, Effinger is your man. Erudite. Compelling.

Recommended for all fans of New Wave SF.

Brief plot summary/analysis

“Lydectes: On the Nature of Sport” (1975), novelette, 4/5 (Good): An unnerving story with two narratives in parallel: The Representative of North America (i.e. dictator) writes a chummy letter to his buddy, and fellow dictator, The Representative of Europe. The letter contains a translation of a manuscript discovered on the planet of Lydectes. The contents of the manuscript tells a Greek-esque story of King Herodes and his friends who discuss the ephemeral nature of fame and entertainment. Their philosophical implications of their discussions play out in the letter exchange between the two dictators.

“And Us, Too, I Guess” (1973), novella, 4.5/5 (Very Good): The disintegration of the relationship, and all its daily micro-agressions and struggles, parallels the end of the world—a biological apocalypse, i.e. the daily disappearance (and ramifications) of one species at a time due to environmental degradation. What loss registers for us? Dogs? A bacteria that could have a greater cascade effect on other species? When do we start to fear our end is near? A haunting, and uncomfortable, read...

“25 Crunch Split Right on Two” (1975), novelette, 4/5 (Good): A beautiful and affective story with a slightly unorthodox (at least for SF) plot—a NFL player named Eldon MacDay discovers that the most severe blows of his opponents trigger lucid memories of his wife. Physical pain allows him to relive his past. And of course, it takes a profound toll on his body and mind. Devastating, emotional.

“Hard Times” (1973), shortstory, 4.5/5 (Very Good): Justin and Bo, two old college buddies, reminisce about their drunken adventures as freshman at Yale. Bo reveals how he killed a young woman while drunk. Justin decides to turn his friend in. The scene fades. Queue another moral dilemma. And another. And another. As the permutations unfold, a doctor whispers through the haze, “you had a difficult test this time. Your mind put up a tough defense” (93). But where does the fantasy end? And, will even an upright purpose eventually step over the line? And the implications of a future world where such torture is perquisite for employment terrifies. Again the syringe drips.... This one hits in the gut i.e. the Rock Hudson writhing in pain à la John Frankenheimer's Seconds (1966) sort of agony.

“At the Bran Foundry” (1973), shortstory, 3.5/5 (Good): The oddest and most distant story in the collection... At first glance it feels as if the explanation eludes below the surface of the whimsy and madcap events. “At the Bran Foundry” feels like an advertisement told as adventure tale or some manifestation of industry through the lens of “Bugs Bunny cartoons that were made during the war” (100)—the Key Club heads to the Bran factory. But the Bran factory doesn't seem to make cereal, or, it does make cereal if cereal “was recently dug out of the rich fields of ore located in the Laurentian highlands of Quebec” (103). A strange concoction...

“Curtains” (1974), shortstory, 4/5 (Good): War as spectacle. Death as entertainment. Standard tropes in anti-war SF... But, Effinger's tale rises above rest. Sergeant First Class Steve Weinraub finds himself in charge

of the regiment and confronted with a crisis—the magazines describe his men as a “shabby troupe seemingly dedicated to defending our borders in the tritest ways imaginable” (110). So, Weinraub conjures a spectacular plan to put on the best performance possible, a scene right out of the movies.

“How It Felt” (1974), shortstory, 3.5/5 (Good): In a post-technological world, seemingly immortal post-humans shift bored with their existence modify their personalities and engage in “repetitious sexual gratifications” (128). Vivi, the only one who seems to have emotions, considers her “talent” a form of “panic” (129). She wishes she could cast of her emotions as they interfere with her relations to her lover Moa. Vivi decides to engage in a new “campaign of studied carelessness” (129)... As the immortals engage in acts of sheer aggression and destruction it appears her desire is achieved. Immortality engenders the destruction of emotion.

“Biting Down Hard on Truth” (1974), novelette, 5/5 (Brilliant): The best of the collection—worth the price of the book. Deserved an award nod in 1975.... Mac, Willie, and Willie’s wife Sam are members of a highly regimented cult with Mithraic undertones and iconographies. The cult leader Jennings has them take endless notes on bombs and armaments, notes that mysteriously disappear from the page. Evenings are spent watching old adventure films à la *Slaves of Blood*. And their lives seem to parallel the films they watch! As escape from the laws and regulations seems possible sheer panic sets in. Cyclicity elicits a hopeless feeling that its is all a figment, a psychotic extravaganza, an obsession seemingly concrete... Mac proclaims to himself, “It’s a very interesting psychological experiment” as Jennings provides “a rigid life, and now he’s removing the laws that we’ve always used as props. It’s pathetic, when you realize how simple he is. And these poor people! They’re helpless” (158).

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