

## Pellucidar

by James P. Blaylock

It seems a little crazy to start out a chat about Edgar Rice Burroughs with a reference to Henry James, but there's something James wrote that I've always liked: "The house of fiction has not one window, but a million," (implying a vast house with countless writers peering out onto the world) "...one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small." Burroughs has a paid-up, exotically-decorated room in a wing of that house – a wing that he shares with William Hope Hodgson and Robert E. Howard and H. Rider Haggard and a crowd of other imaginative adventure writers that I came to admire decades ago. Through his particular window Burroughs consistently saw things big and in vivid colors. As a reader, I like to think of myself visiting that room now and then (pipe smoke, a decanter and glasses, prints on the wall, a soft wind blowing in off the jungle) looking out that onto the landscape of Pellucidar. What I

see, however, isn't necessarily what Burroughs sees (or saw). My Pellucidar is largely depicted on two of the Krenkel-painted covers on the old Ace Classic editions: *Tanar of Pellucidar* and *At the Earth's Core*. The cover of the first is a depiction of a craggy, tropical mountainside with a rampaging woolly mammoth, the vast distances visible through the haze. The other is a scene set beneath a jungle canopy that's a mass of dark green, down-drooping foliage and lianas, with red, phoenix-like birds flying past.

Forty years ago, when I was attempting to write my first novel, I had been reading a lot of Burroughs, and I had the idea of making my book a hollow earth story, except that the narrator was probably a lunatic who perhaps merely imagined that the earth was hollow and that Pellucidar actually existed. He was obsessed with the idea that a villainous character was going to dig through to the Earth's core in a mechanical mole (my version of Burroughs's "practical prospector") setting off a cataclysm that would half-destroy the earth. I pictured a final scene in which my man turned out to be correct – dinosaurs and giant trees spewing out of a vast hole in the ground and cartwheeling into the air. I liked that bit in *At the Earth's Core* when David Innes says, "Then Perry interested me in his invention." That seemed to me to be loaded with potential, like the face of Helen of Troy. An author might use it to launch a thousand stories, a

different invention in each. Over the course of a couple of years I wrote a hundred thousand words or so of that first unfinished novel, every chapter introducing some new, crazy thing – a dairy out in Eagle Rock, California, that produced poisonous milk from plaster of Paris, a troupe of Bulgarian acrobats lead by a joke-cracking hunchback who befriends the narrator, a Chinese laundry that's somehow mixed up with the dairy, which is mixed up with the devious business of the mechanical mole, which was mixed up with the death of the Earth. The mixed-up plot opened outward like a blooming peony, only not quite as organized, until it struck me absolutely that it couldn't possibly be pulled back in on itself again. The manuscript went into the drawer.

From time to time I'd take it out and try again, because I couldn't get the idea of the story out of my head. I'd fall asleep at night wondering whether the distant rumbling was freeway traffic or was the mechanical mole of my own invention, laboring away deep in the Earth. I went through a phase when I was reading Proust, and I tried the whole thing out again with elaborately long and exotic sentences. That didn't help. I put it away again, forever, or so I thought. Then, a couple of years later there was an article in the news about an unemployed dockworker in Long Beach who tied helium balloons to an armchair and flew through the skies above Los

Angeles, 10,000 feet in the air. (Several people have reenacted this since, by the way, no doubt intrepid souls, but unoriginal.) I heard the news flash on the car radio while I was driving down to Lucky Supermarket to buy groceries, and suddenly I saw how I could write my book. I pictured my hero in that same lawn chair, descending into the polar opening of Pellucidar, carrying a sack lunch, canteen, and a pair of binoculars.

That very afternoon I launched the novel afresh, from the point of view of an imaginative young man named Jim Hastings, who covets his uncle's collection of Burroughs novels, and whose strange friend, Giles Peach, falls under the spell of the Roy Krenkel covers and sets out to build a mechanical mole from junk parts in his garage. Jim's father, newly escaped from the madhouse (and actually the lunatic narrator from my first attempt at writing the novel years earlier) enters the story in the second chapter by climbing over the ivy-covered back wall of their suburban house in Glendale, losing his shoe in the ordeal. From that point on the novel virtually wrote itself, although I never did find a way to put in the helium balloons and the lawn chair. I happily sent off the finished novel (by now titled *The Digging Leviathan*) to Susan Allison, my editor at Ace Books, who called on the phone several days later. "I like it," she said, although she

sounded puzzled, maybe a little tired. “But you said you were writing a hollow earth novel, and your characters never get out of Glendale....”

“I guess you’re right,” I told her, hoping that she wouldn’t ask for the advance money back, since I had spent it months earlier. Actually setting scenes in Pellucidar hadn’t occurred to me. I had no interest in rewriting Burroughs, after all. He and Roy Krenkel and Frank Frazetta were my inspiration, but I didn’t want to use their map, or borrow their armchair and helium balloons. If I hadn’t grown up reading Burroughs, and didn’t own those Ace Classic editions, I wouldn’t have written *The Digging Leviathan* at all. I wouldn’t have had any interest in Pellucidar. I wouldn’t have read and been somewhat-moderately convinced by *The Hollow Earth*, published by University Press (inarguable credibility) and written by Dr. Raymond Bernard, AB, MA, PhD, who carefully reveals the complex science behind the phenomenon of the world within. In short, I would have missed the trolley to Pellucidar and remained on the surface of things.

I never tire of telling a story that was related to me by William Gibson some time after the publication of the novel. He walked into a bookstore in Vancouver and asked the proprietor whether he had a book by James Blaylock called *The Digging Leviathan*. “Yes,” the man said to him,

nodding skeptically. Then, with a puzzled expression on his face, he asked, “Do you know if it’s supposed to be funny?”

Well, it’s not. It was written as a sort of ode to Burroughs and Krenkel and Frazetta and to the whole colorful, strange, wonderful idea that is Pellucidar. I’m not through with it yet. (Okay, parts of it were pretty damned funny, if I do say so myself.)

Every once in a while I like to consider the desert island dilemma. Forget the desert island – let’s say I’m going to Pellucidar itself, maybe never to return. I’ve got room for five books in my backpack. In go *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Wind in the Willows*, *Tristram Shandy* and *The Pickwick Papers*... What else? *I Go Pogo*? Maybe. *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*? *The Code of the Woosters*? This won’t be easy.... I look at my shelf of Burroughs novels, and I realize that when I was fourteen *The Moon Men* would have gone into the backpack. But I’m 60 now, and my literary sensibilities have moved on. *At the Earth’s Core*? It seems like a sketchy idea to carry a Pellucidar novel into Pellucidar – coals to Newcastle, one might say. But so what? On the cover of the book, illuminated by the interior sun glowing through the jungle foliage, two cave women are approaching, sitting atop spiky-headed brontosaurus creatures. I’m pretty sure that the woman on the left is waving at me.

I take down the other six volumes and study the covers. I've got to have all seven. Seven is very nearly a metaphor, after all. And in my life, I realize, so is Pellucidar. It seems to me to signify everything that's colorful, adventurous, and good about growing up reading books. It's a land I staked out in my youth, a land that I've returned to happily over the years. I pull the peanut butter-filled pretzels out of the backpack and regretfully toss them onto the study floor. Out with the Leatherman tool, the Necco Wafers, the propane match, and the aluminum foil. I cram the books into the knapsack and head out into the back yard, where I climb into the mechanical mole (or the lawn chair, or the deep sea explorer – there's sub-oceanic tunnel to Pellucidar in the Sargasso Sea, believe it or not) and away I go. If you're reading this at all, I'll probably see you there.

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