
Subject: DOWNTIMING THE NIGHTSIDE and
VENGANCE OF THE DANCING GODS by Jack Chalker
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Until recently, I was a great fan of Chalker. I had read the WELL OF SOULS series, AND THE DEVIL WILL DRAG YOU UNDER, and his DANCING GODS books. These three sets contain quite interesting and distinct (though similar) ideas, and I thought he was the greatest thing since buttered toast. I have since read most of his other works, and with the advent of DOWNTIMING THE NIGHTSIDE I have become quite disheartened at the quality of some of his novels.

***** MILD SPOILER *****

The WELL OF SOULS books brought forth many interesting ideas and plot structures, which Chalker has since rehashed in almost all of his other books. It is understandable for a writer to use the same theories on the universe, etc. in his other stories, but Chalker reuses *plots*! In many of his stories (EXILES AT THE WELL OF SOULS, SOUL RIDER: EMPIRES OF FLUX AND ANCHOR, DANCERS IN THE AFTERGLOW, A WAR OF SHADOWS, and DOWNTIMING THE NIGHTSIDE) a previously strong, likable female character is transformed into some weird sort of mutant sex-creature for no adequately explored reason. In one or two books, such a thing would be no problem, but five times seems a little ridiculous.

Though in DOWNTIMING he does not deal with any "Primal Equations" (his most excessively reused idea), Chalker still came up with what I think is a very bad theory of Time (perhaps I am biased; I think all theories of time pale before the one in Hogan's THRICE UPON A TIME). It goes something like this: there is an actual "present" and "past" but the future hasn't happened yet. The past may be altered, but the World will readjust upon the lines of least resistance, so the relative future comes out as close to the same as

possible (said one of the characters: "Change something big, and you end up with what you started with, but worse."). The difference in this theory is that when you go into the past, Nature assimilates you. This means that you are caused to fit in. The Universe alters you physically, and shifts the past so that you were, in fact, born in that era. Your mind, too, is assimilated, but this takes about two weeks, giving you a chance to escape. Because of this assimilation, it is perfectly legal to go back in time and kill your own father so that you were never born. The person who actually killed your father was not *you*, it was the person you were assimilated to be; they had a birth and life history themselves, so there was no paradox when the person who had "become" them was never born. In order that as little as possible is changed, Downtimers usually wind up as low on the social scale as possible (women, children, or handicapped, usually).

(One Unforgivable Sin: One of the characters asked why it was impossible to go back in time to a point *after* your own birth. The Answer: Basic Physics! You can't exist twice in the same place. I find it hard to believe that anyone would answer a question about *TIME TRAVEL* of all things with "Basic Physics," especially since it doesn't answer the question at all. The atoms which make up your body have been around since the dawn of time, so this "Basic Physics" disallows *all* time travel! Flame off.)

What I at first thought was an incredible plot was this: The Main Character was rescued by a strange woman in an era some time before his birth. They met again farther back in time and were married and had some kids. The man went forward in time and became a woman (due to Time Assimilation). S/he then went back in time and married the man (him/herself). Then after having kids, etc. the woman went forward in time and rescued the man, thus completing the double-interlaced loop. This would have been the most incredible thing ever, had it not already been done! Id est, ALL YOU ZOMBIES by Heinlein, 1959.

The main plot of DOWNTIMING THE NIGHTSIDE is a fairly standard one, that of a "Time War," (the two sides are trying to cause each other to never have existed). This story has some interesting points (such as the "possibles" presented when a Downtimer accidentally kills Karl Marx *twice*, (the second "before" the first)), but it is far from Chalker's best, and gets quite depressing. Avoidance is suggested.

***** SPOILER OFF *****

However, just when I had decided that Chalker was a Traitor to the Faith, VENGEANCE OF THE DANCING GODS was released. This book is truly awesome, and (in my eyes) has justified whatever else he has done wrong. VENGEANCE is the third book in the series, the first two being RIVER OF THE DANCING GODS and DEMONS OF THE DANCING GODS.

***** SPOILER WARNING (again) *****

For those of you unfamiliar with the series, it goes like this: In the first book, a wizard from another world (Throckmorton P. Ruddygore) righty magical sword Irving) and Marge of the Faerie (wings and all).

Husaquahr, the world into which they are cast, is a strange one indeed. It is filled with the Faerie and other creatures of myth and legend. Magic runs rampant. In the Beginning, when Husaquahr was created, it was very raw; there were few natural laws, so the great wizards got together to set down some more rules. At first, these were very basic, such as restrictions on magical power, etc. but they eventually got out of hand. The books of Rules came to comprise several thousand volumes of laws such as

"A Company shall be composed of no less than seven individuals, at least one of whom should not be completely trusted.

--XXXIV, 363, 244(a)"

and

"A percentage of all seats of magic shall be dark towers, said percentage to be not less than twenty percent of all such seats of power at any given time. Practitioners of the Black Arts shall be given preference for these locations.

--IV, 203(b) & (c)"

These rules are not just decrees; they are actual laws of nature. Barbarians cannot help going scantily clad in furs, and the Evil cannot help leaving the Virtuous an opening, however tenuous, in their fiendish plots.

VENGEANCE OF THE DANCING GODS ("All epics must be at least trilogies. --XVI, 103, 12(d)) deals with the return of an Old Enemy. Esmillo Boquillas, an evil wizard, had been stripped of his powers and exiled to Earth where he would be harmless. He wasn't. Though he could not cast spells to make trouble, he could develop them and have others with the Talent cast them for him. When his ex-apprentice found a way to Earth, Ruddygore knew there would be trouble. The spells that Boquillas developed were quite formidable, for rather than painstakingly calculating all of the variables and side-effects by hand, he created them with a computer. In his first several months on Earth, Boquillas learned as much as he could about computers, because he realized their potential, and that "Today's machines don't come with WizardCalc." He was exceptionally good with the machines because, for all its mystery, Magic is only mathematics. And Boquillas was a *very* good wizard.

Joe, Marge, and some of their allies were sent to Earth to assassinate Boquillas before he grew too powerful (he had already become a TV Evangelist). Among their companions was a mermaid, who was normally useless on land, but... Ruddygore cast a spell on her which was inspired by a film he had seen while on vacation in Chicago: while dry, she had legs. A

Masterstroke! Once on Earth, the company was joined by a Tinkerbellish Pixie from Brooklin and a depressed ex-exorcist, and eventually (punfully) saved both worlds from Armageddon.

***** SPOILER OFF *****

The DANCING GODS books are the third most amusing series I have ever read (the first two being the HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE and MYTH ADVENTURES), and I highly recommend them. Chalker is quite obviously capable of writing excellent books, so things like DOWNTIMING and A WAR OF SHADOWS are hard to understand. But I guess it is not uncommon for authors to become fixated on certain plots or situations (viz: Heinlein's Capable Man, and Asimov's robots (*what* were they doing in FOUNDATION'S EDGE?!?)). Despite a few dogs, most of Chalker's books are very good, if similar. He just needs to expand a little from his previously covered topics.

--Jamie
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