

# The Bleeding Man Revisited

*Craig Strete and the story the Los Angeles Times did not publish*

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*The Los Angeles Times Magazine* had commissioned my investigation, and it had accepted the finished article. Then Harlan Ellison threatened legal action if the magazine published a piece mentioning him. The article was killed.

Stephen P. Brown published it in *Science Fiction Eye* in the winter of 1991. A small magazine devoted to speculative fiction put into print the reporting a major newspaper would not.

The ostensible subject was a stolen novel. Ron Montana said Craig Strete had taken his manuscript and published it under his own name. Strete said their abandoned collaboration had reached print because Doubleday published the wrong version. Each account demanded examination. By the time I finished, the question of who had written what was entangled with another: who would be permitted to report it?

Ellison, whose public standing owed much to his appetite for confronting authority, had brought the threat of a lawsuit to bear on a newspaper investigating a fellow writer. Montana's grievance supplied the occasion. Ellison's hostility toward Strete, I learned, had a history of its own.

I had not known of his involvement when I took the assignment. I thought I was going to San Jose to investigate an accusation of plagiarism. I found a failed collaboration, a publisher unwilling to explain itself publicly, and a literary community in which the verdict had largely preceded the inquiry. When my reporting complicated that verdict, the reporter became part of the dispute.

Thirty-five years later, the article's route into print belongs at the beginning. It helps explain why the account that survived in circulation was so much simpler than the evidence.

## The book at BayCon

On Memorial Day in 1988, Ron Montana was wandering around BayCon, a science-fiction convention at a San Francisco hotel, when his friend Richard Russo showed him a review of Craig Strete's forthcoming novel. The plot sounded familiar.

They approached the reviewer, a local bookseller with a booth in the dealers' room. He had a galley of *Death in the Spirit House* at his shop and went to retrieve it.

"Ron about had a heart attack," Russo recalled. "He was just dumbfounded. He kept saying, 'This is my book. I can't believe this guy did this.'"

Doubleday published the hardcover under Strete's name that year. Montana claimed authorship. The *Santa Clara Valley Business Journal* put the accusation on its front page. At San Jose State University, where Strete taught creative writing, his employers opened an investigation.

The appearance in August 1990 of a Bantam Spectra paperback under Montana's name alone seemed to settle the question. A publishing company had, apparently, corrected its mistake. Readers could hardly be blamed for drawing the obvious conclusion.

But changing the name on a cover did not explain how the manuscript had arrived at Doubleday, what the two men had written together, or which version the publisher had intended to print. Those questions led away from the account Montana had given the press.

Montana described a casual acquaintance beginning in 1978. He had asked Strete to look at a script called *Survivor*. A year later, he told Strete he had turned it into a novel, *Face in the Snow*. Strete asked for a copy and suggested he might be able to do something with it. Then, in 1988, Montana found his book published under Strete's name.

"When I met him," Montana told me, "Strete seemed like a glad-handing, Hollywood kind of guy. But who knew that he was someone who would steal your book?"

There was a problem with the chronology. In 1973, years before Montana acknowledged meeting Strete, Strete's fanzine *Red Planet Earth* had published "We the People" by R. A. Montana.

That issue did not decide the ownership of a novel. It did establish a prior relationship that Montana's account omitted.

"He was sort of my discovery," Strete said. "I was real proud of him, putting him up for SFWA membership and sending his stories around to publishers."

The relationship had extended to work on the manuscript. Strete never denied that the published *Death in the Spirit House* contained a substantial amount of Montana's writing. Montana put his contribution at precisely 87 percent. Yet a letter from one of the attorneys he employed during the dispute acknowledged a division slightly in Strete's favor. The percentages were contested; the existence of contributions from both men was harder to wish away.

Strete said they had spent years on a collaboration that failed. When they abandoned it, he said, they agreed each could revise his own version and try to sell it independently. What Doubleday published, he maintained, was material from the collaboration, rather than the extensively rewritten book in which he had replaced most, if not all, of Montana's contribution.

Montana's public account did not acknowledge a sustained collaboration or an agreement to separate their work. Attempts to pursue those discrepancies with him went nowhere. He said his lawyer did not want him to comment further.

Strete's evidence for the agreement was compromised by his own habits. He said he had possessed a letter from Montana's lawyer confirming it. He had discarded the letter with other papers during one of two cross-country moves, then foolishly told Montana he no longer had it.

There was, however, another witness. Will Guest, a writer and architectural model-maker at Entertainment Design International in North Hollywood, said he had seen a letter from Montana asking for the rights to his version and stating that Strete could do what he wished with his own.

Guest's recollection supported Strete. It could not replace the missing document, especially in a dispute where so much depended on which version of a manuscript or an agreement had survived.

## The wrong manuscript

Strete's dealings with Doubleday began with an undertaking he could not fulfill. Early in the 1980s, he sold the publisher a trilogy drawing on Aztec mythology and culture. *Creatures of the Night* and its projected companions proved beyond him.

"The deadline came and went," he said, "and rather than do the promised books, I substituted two books of short stories—*Death Chants* and *To Make Death Love Us*." The latter was a collection with Robert Campbell. That left a third book to deliver.

A source high in Doubleday told me that senior editor Pat LoBrutto encouraged Strete to revive the Montana collaboration. A substantially revised version, replacing Montana's characters with Native Americans and reworking much of the material, was considered suitable. LoBrutto had received an early version under both writers' names. He paid Strete the balance of the money owed on the contract.

Strete understood that publication would wait until 1990. He thought he had time to finish rewriting. Instead, amid changes at the publishing company, the schedules moved forward. Two sets of galleys reached him in quick succession. According to Strete, both contained the wrong material.

The first was *Death Chants*, intended as his farewell to short fiction. Its galley arrived five days before it was due at the printer.

"Instead of the more than three-hundred-page manuscript I had handed in," he said, "the galley contained a one-hundred-and-fifty-page sample of unrevised work that I had submitted to sell the book."

He had kept no copy of the finished collection. LoBrutto's copy had gone to a magazine editor, who selected stories and discarded the remainder. Strete undertook a frantic reconstruction, substituting plays for stories he could no longer recover. He delivered the replacements by hand and came away with an assurance that they would appear.

They did not.

The Doubleday source corroborated this part of the account. "The typesetters threw the plays out, claiming the book was too long. It wasn't—we had simply not changed the typesetting, which made it seem long. The dust jacket listed four plays which aren't even in the book."

Two days after the *Death Chants* galley, Strete said, the galley for *Death in the Spirit House* arrived. It contained the sample he had supplied to indicate how he proposed to rewrite the Montana collaboration.

He spent another week rewriting and hand-delivered the manuscript to LoBrutto. This time, he said, he extracted a promise that the original galley would be destroyed. It was not. LoBrutto left town on business. Strete and his wife, Irma, a Dutch translator, moved west for his teaching job. The disputed version went into print.

The source inside Doubleday offered a consequential admission. Had Strete made clear that the original manuscript presented an ownership problem, that would have been enough to stop publication.

“We thought he and Montana had settled that between them; that this was just another case of a writer balking because everything was not letter-perfect.”

This left Strete with a serious responsibility. He knew the manuscript contained another writer’s work. His publisher apparently treated his objections as the familiar unhappiness of an author who wanted another pass at his prose. Somehow, the essential warning had failed to reach the people who could act on it.

Norman Spinrad, a former president of the Science Fiction Writers of America, called the sequence a “horrendously complicated screw-up—if it happened the way Craig describes it.” The qualification was necessary. My source corroborated important parts of Strete’s account; the publisher would not provide a full explanation on the record.

One SFWA member who had published with Doubleday found the alleged failure almost inconceivable. The company’s copy editing had been first-rate, its contracts handled efficiently. “The screw-up Strete describes is a whole order of magnitude beyond anything I’ve heard.”

Spinrad, also a Doubleday author, thought there should have been several opportunities to stop the book. “Somebody should have caught this thing before it got that far.” Richard Lupoff, who had tried unsuccessfully to bring Montana and Strete together on his radio program, thought there had been “a lot of trusting that went on at Doubleday that shouldn’t have.”

The subsequent handling of authorship clarified little. Doubleday withdrew a decision to give Montana copyright in the book. Montana said the company believed he had violated a gag order by going to the press. Strete believed its legal department had mistakenly assumed it possessed his written authorization to change the copyright, then discovered it did not. He said the lawyers had never consulted him.

Bantam Doubleday Dell spokesman Stuart Applebaum would say only that the company hoped the men would resolve their differences.

That left the publisher’s own conduct largely outside the public argument. Whatever had happened in its offices, the writers could continue fighting over the result.

## **A talent without safeguards**

Strete made a poor custodian of his own defense. He lost papers, trusted oral assurances and treated professional obligations as difficulties he could repair with another burst of writing. In this case, that carelessness exposed someone else’s work as well as his own.

It was a familiar pattern. In 1981, he withdrew “A Sunday Visit to Great Grandfather” from consideration for a Nebula Award because it was a reprint. Neither the people who nominated it nor Marta Randall, the anthologist who had published it, had known. Strete said the wrong version had been sold twice without his knowledge. He was not then a member of SFWA and claimed ignorance of its eligibility rules.

“Is big mess and blame is mine,” read his statement to the assembled writers. “I have no great explanation except my life is an obstacle course with me its biggest obstacle.”

Spinrad liked him and did not think him a crook. He also described a man who forgot what he had published or sold rights twice. “He is the kind of guy who shouldn’t be allowed to do anything except sit in a room with a typewriter.”

Gregory Benford saw a writer who overextended his commitments and finances, then grabbed whatever was available to patch the damage. “The Montana project was one very dumb Band-Aid.”

Those assessments were more useful than either a declaration of innocence or a wholesale denunciation. Strete’s disorganization was a professional failure with consequences for other people. It also provided an unusually favorable setting for anyone who wanted to turn an accusation against him into a final judgment.

The talent was real. Don Heiney, who taught at Irvine and published fiction as MacDonald Harris, remembered a “vigorous, strong-minded, energetic writer.” Benford recalled his “wild originality.” Collections including *If All Else Fails* and “*The Bleeding Man*” & *Other Stories* gave readers ample opportunity to judge the work without consulting his biography.

His biography was another matter. Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Strete described himself as a farm boy and a voracious reader who barely survived high school academically. He studied filmmaking at Wright State University before discovering that paper cost less than film. His former roommate William Rotsler said he destroyed a typewriter every time he wrote a book.

He assembled *Red Planet Earth* and wrote much of its early contents. He later entered the graduate writing program at the University of California, Irvine. He also worked, according to accounts gathered for the original article, as an uncredited script doctor. Bruce McAllister attributed work on *Chinatown* to him. Other film and television claims were harder to establish. Spinrad thought that working without adequate contracts in that world had encouraged habits disastrous to his dealings with Montana.

Strete could make verification more difficult by elaborating on his achievements. Rotsler put it plainly: “Craig is very inclined to fantasize stories.” Oakley Hall remembered a student who always had more successes to announce than anybody else, another play being produced or movie being written.

As the scandal developed, skepticism spread from his account of the novel to virtually everything he said about himself. Detractors challenged the endorsements attributed to Jorge Luis Borges, Salvador Dalí and John Lennon. They dismissed his European reputation and his associations with musicians. They questioned his account of Native American ancestry, despite a letter from his adoptive parents supporting his account of his origins.

Ellison participated in that broader assault, portraying Strete as a fraud whose literary career and identity rested on invention. A disputed manuscript had become an invitation to prosecute an entire life.

Strete had few reserves of goodwill within the field. “He doesn’t go to conventions,” McAllister observed. “He doesn’t stroke people enough or pay the kind of attention to others that he should. He’s never committed to the ghetto, and if you don’t, you’re in trouble.”

Tall stories were hardly unknown among science-fiction writers. The indulgence granted their tellers was less evenly distributed.

## **The cost of the verdict**

When Strete and his family arrived in California, they moved into a Motel 6. He telephoned Montana, the one person he knew locally, expecting a welcome. Instead, he said, Montana screamed that he had stolen his book.

Strete offered half the money he had received and proposed stickers identifying Montana as co-author. Montana hung up. Irma remembered her husband putting down the telephone and crying.

Such proposals could sound like admissions to a man convinced his novel had been stolen. Strete treated them as practical remedies for a publishing disaster. He even suggested that Montana’s *Face in the Snow* be published alongside his own separate work. Nothing came of it.

Montana pursued the grievance through a succession of lawyers for two years without filing suit. He pressed San Jose State to dismiss Strete, secured the paperback credit, and took the accusation to newspapers and the *SFWA Forum*. From what I learned during the investigation, Ellison was bankrolling those legal efforts.

At the university, Strete continued teaching while the inquiry proceeded, but administrative restrictions prevented him from answering freely. Silence was readily interpreted as an inability to answer. A member of the English department asked how he dared show his face on campus.

The *San Jose Mercury News* published a cartoon attributing *Moby Dick*, *In Cold Blood*, *War and Peace* and *Green Eggs and Ham* to San Jose State faculty. The university, already bruised by other public-relations troubles, had little appetite for this one. Strete faced pressure to resign before the investigating committee announced its findings.

“Because of the ruckus,” novelist and writing professor Rob Swigart told me, “the inference is mounting that he is some kind of con artist.”

Barry Schneider, a screenwriter and friend of Montana, had already reached his conclusion. Strete did not deserve his academic position. “He did the worst thing you could do against a fellow writer—he stole his work.”

Montana’s anger was understandable. A book containing a substantial amount of his writing had appeared under another man’s name. Nothing in the publishing history made that grievance imaginary. But acknowledging the injury did not establish every claim made in its pursuit. The prior collaboration, the conflicting accounts of their agreement and the publisher’s role remained essential to any fair assessment.

Strete admitted poor judgment and appalling record-keeping. He had delayed consulting a lawyer, relied on goodwill after it had evaporated and trusted a publisher whose assurances had already failed him. He denied theft.

His assistant and family friend Michelle Netten-Chacon described a household unable to escape the controversy for even part of a day. McAllister could hear the damage in his voice: “He is like a little kid who can’t believe that the world plays this way.”

The original reporting stopped before the university inquiry produced its verdict. A responsible retrospective cannot fill that gap with the outcome it would prefer.

## **The Paperwork They Didn’t Want You to Read**

By the time I understood Ellison’s involvement, I also understood that the Montana affair did not explain all of it.

During the 1970s, Ellison had acquired a Strete story for *The Last Dangerous Visions*. Publication was promised and postponed. Strete eventually asked for his manuscript back so he could place it elsewhere. As I came to understand their relationship, that request contributed substantially to the hostility that followed.

It was an awkward history for a campaign conducted in the name of a writer’s ownership of his work. Strete had asked an editor to release a story held for a book that did not appear. Years later, the same editor helped finance another writer’s campaign against him over a disputed manuscript.

I cannot establish how much of Ellison’s intervention arose from concern for Montana and how much from animosity toward Strete. The observable conduct is sufficient. Ellison supported the campaign, attacked Strete’s credibility well beyond the disputed book and then threatened the publication investigating it.

The evidence frustrating a simple account of theft was unglamorous. An old fanzine established that the men knew each other earlier than Montana acknowledged. A lawyer’s letter complicated the claim that virtually all the writing was Montana’s. Guest recalled correspondence supporting an agreement to separate the manuscripts. A source inside Doubleday corroborated failures in the publisher’s handling of Strete’s books.

Each item had limits. The fanzine proved a prior relationship, not ownership. Guest was recalling a document Strete could no longer produce. An unnamed publishing source could not stand in for an institutional accounting. None of those limitations justified leaving the evidence out.

Ellison contacted my editor, attacked my reporting and my character, and threatened legal action if the magazine ran an article mentioning him. The magazine had already accepted the piece. It did not publish it.

That is the sequence I can report. I was not inside every conversation through which the newspaper reached its decision. Nor was there a judicial finding that disposed of my reporting. The threat achieved the practical result of preventing the magazine’s readers from seeing it.

For the newspaper, an accepted article had become a potential expense. For the reporter, months of work had become unusable in the place that commissioned it. For the people whose conduct the article examined, killing publication removed the immediate prospect of public scrutiny. Accuracy alone had not carried the article into print.

Ellison's reputation as a combative defender of expression makes the episode particularly revealing. Here he sought to determine whether reporting about his own conduct could appear. The newspaper's capacity to defend itself did not translate into a willingness to do so.

Having served in Sinai, I found literary intimidation easier to keep in proportion. That did not make the threat irrelevant: Ellison needed to alarm my publisher, not me. My task remained to establish the chronology, ask the questions and distinguish what the documents showed from what people wanted them to mean.

Brown's decision gave that work a readership. *Science Fiction Eye* published "The Bleeding Man" in its winter 1991 issue. It could not restore the audience the *Times Magazine* would have supplied, but it preserved a contemporary account against which later versions of the affair could be checked.

Ellison and I had other disagreements over the years. My *Los Angeles Times* profile of Mordecai Richler compared the novelist's curmudgeonly reputation with Ellison's; my review of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* criticized an entry on Ellison I considered embarrassingly admiring. I came to regard his attacks on my work and motives as a continuing personal feud. Those differences belong in the record, but they do not alter what happened to the Strete article.

## **What the record leaves us**

Strete died in 2024. Ron Montana died on January 1, 2025. SFWA's memorial remembered Montana's fiction, screenwriting, television work and service on its Grievance Committee. It did not revisit the Strete dispute.

Ellison had died in 2018. *The Last Dangerous Visions* finally appeared in 2024 under J. Michael Straczynski's stewardship, working with the Ellison estate. Its publication closed one long-delayed undertaking. It did not erase the years during which contributors had waited for their stories to appear or sought to recover them.

Strete's work remained available to readers, but the accusation attached to his name proved easier to repeat than the history behind it. An old collaboration and a publisher's handling of competing manuscripts required explanation. "He stole a book" required none.

I do not revisit this affair to make Strete blameless. His handling of manuscripts, agreements and other people's interests was reckless. Talent did not excuse it. Montana had a real grievance, and Strete's suggestion that money and a sticker might settle it showed how badly he misunderstood the damage.

Neither does Montana's grievance confer accuracy on every account offered in his name. Nor does Ellison's literary achievement excuse an attempt to suppress reporting. Readers can admire the

fiction and examine the conduct. Indeed, admiration makes the examination more necessary when a writer's reputation supplies the authority with which he acts against others.

What troubled me then, and troubles me still, is how readily the field accepted the disappearance of distinctions it should have cared about. Collaboration became theft without an adequate accounting of the collaboration. A publisher's silence left its authors to absorb the blame. Personal hostility acquired the standing of moral judgment. The reporter who asked inconvenient questions became someone whose work should not appear.

The survival of the article did not undo the damage to Strete or resolve Montana's claim. It preserved the questions the public verdict had skipped. That was Brown's contribution, and it is why the small magazine matters to this history.

Ellison could make the *Times Magazine* decide that the story was too much trouble. He could not make the earlier publication in *Red Planet Earth* disappear, resolve the conflicting accounts of the manuscripts or turn Doubleday's refusal to explain itself into an explanation. Those details survived because somebody printed them.

The work deserves to be read. The conduct deserves to be recorded. Neither obligation cancels the other.