

Introduction to *Beholder's Eye*

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My thanks to the kind and enthusiastic folks at peanutpress.com and DAW Books Inc. for allowing me to add this special introduction to the electronic edition of my book. I enjoy the opportunity to add something new and, even better, it's a chance to share a moment with you, the reader graciously giving my work your time and attention.

Work? Forgive me, but I have to smile at that: one of those really broad, "I have a secret," smiles. If anything, what you hold here is what I've done for years as my break from work. To be paid to do it still feels as though someone somewhere hasn't quite caught on to me yet.

Since I write for pleasure, why science fiction? That one's easy. I write science fiction because science has always been a source of wonder to me. As a biologist, I studied living things as alien to my own being as any extraterrestrials I could imagine. I'm fascinated by life in all its forms and speculate about it constantly. Indeed, one of those speculations led to this book you've downloaded.

I was working on a statistical comparison of life span and reproductive strategy in a variety of species – fairly basic stuff in ecology. Then I began jotting down some numbers, extrapolating my graphs to play with the notion of a virtually immortal organism. To provide a basis for this life span, I imagined a life form able to manipulate its molecular structure – the "what if?" diversion from reality on which science fiction depends. With this ability, my imaginary beings could repair cellular damage due to aging; taken further, they could camouflage themselves against their surroundings by modifying their physical shape at the most fundamental level.

I was intrigued. If such long-lived beings were intelligent, what would they do? What sort of culture would they have, if any? If you knew your own molecular structure, what else might you do with that knowledge besides remember your shape? You could exchange information biochemically, rather than by language. The possibilities were mounting. How would such beings alter over time? Here was a perfect model for the role of long-term learning on behavior. By this point, I was having serious fun -- marking a lot of exams in between -- but having fun. If anyone reading this happens to have taken an undergraduate course with me, I now confess this is what made me so cheerful while monitoring the grim hordes of your classmates during the finals in the gym. I wasn't really amused by your faces when you hit "those" questions. Well, I might have been a *little* amused. Seven hundred and fifty-one simultaneous looks of dismay are hard to miss.

As I continued playing with ideas, I knew I wasn't interested in writing about immortal beings tired of sensation and their lives, planning to fold, spindle, or otherwise mutilate the universe to relieve their boredom. For one thing, I can't recall

being bored for a conscious instant of my life, a character flaw perhaps, but one that does keep me busy. So I imagined my beings as collectors, archivists by trade, curious, meticulous, and peaceful. They would be secretive: recluses by choice in a galaxy crowded with other species whose life spans were mere flickers by comparison.

Every story I've written gains its hold on my heart -- I couldn't devote months to one if it didn't -- but I freely admit *Beholder's Eye* has its hooks deeper than any other. Reading it still makes me laugh and cry, then laugh some more. The hold started when I drew up a point-of-view character to tell the tale.

Esen-alit-Quar, Esen for friends, Es in a hurry. Ancient by human standards, barely past childhood by those of her species, the Web. Good manners and even better intentions. More curious than the proverbial cat and chronically unable to keep out of trouble, especially someone else's. In her natural state, a cobalt blue blob of jelly with teeth and the zest of a teenager raiding a newly-stocked refrigerator. In any other form -- remember Esen and her kin are profoundly capable of manipulating their molecular selves -- that zest remains unchanged. Esen is always *who* she is, no matter *what* she is.

I was immediately captivated by Esen. Would anyone else be? Before I sold *Beholder's Eye*, some in the profession thoughtfully advised me the main character of a marketable book had to be human, or at least some reasonable facsimile. Otherwise, no matter how fine the story, I was dooming myself and the book to, at best, marginal readership. While I always appreciate well-meant advice, and consider it very carefully, this particular wisdom didn't influence me at all. Esen was such fun to write, I was convinced readers would enjoy her as much as I. It was a tremendous thrill and vindication in one when Sheila Gilbert at DAW Books bought *Beholder's Eye*, especially when she told me how much she liked my non-human protagonist.

What is it about Esen that made me believe so firmly in what is admittedly a rather peculiar character? She reminds me a great deal of springtime in the northern woods. The weather dances from blizzard to glorious sunshine and back to frost without missing a step. Flowers, leaves, and mushrooms explode into life. Fragrant black mud grabs your boots and you pay in bites for every lovely moment outdoors. In short, life runs rampant over any human expectation and has a great time doing it. Wonder-filled and often inconvenient. Ancient and always young. That's Esen in spades.

A speculation and a character, however complex, are not a story. There has to be something happening, some idea to explore. I kept thinking in terms of ecology: namely, how would Esen's species interact with others? What would happen if their secret lives were exposed? I daydreamed and scribbled notes to myself about this and that, stuffing all into the folder marked XIII. (One reason I suspect I'm never bored is a tendency to daydream in several directions at once.) Then, one day, I found I'd written one small scene instead of what I'd planned, a scene culminating everything I wanted to say in this story. It was the ending of *Beholder's Eye*, word for word as you will find it in this or any other edition. Not a typical way to start a book, I agree, but fortunately, I didn't have any problem filling in the rest.

I hope you enjoy meeting Esen-alit-Quar. If you do, you might like to meet me as well. Authors can't help but put something of themselves into characters and I'm uncomfortably aware that Esen owns more than her share of me. I value good manners and intentions. With any luck, my schemes to resolve problems work a little more smoothly than hers – but they don't always. I'm always conscious of *who* I am, no matter the *what* of the moment. As for her curiosity? Suffice to say I'm one of those whose idea of a good walk involves both turning over stones and peering at the sky, and I have a truly insatiable need to know what's over the next hill.

I hope you enjoy finding out with me.