

The Facts, History, and Science behind
The Chronocar

Includes sample chapters

Black White and Red
The Facts, History, and Science behind
The Chronocar
(Second Edition)
by Steve Bellinger
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We were raised by a single mother who worked nights for a printing company, a one hour bus ride one way from our cold water flat on the West Side of Chicago. Her job was to help the press operators collate and pack books and magazines. She would often bring home stacks of scrap paper that we could draw and write on. More importantly she would bring home lots of paperback books and magazines, also. An avid reader herself, she could always be seen with her head buried in an Ellery Queen or Alfred Hitchcock novel, so we learned to love reading through her example.

She also made a point to bring home different kinds of books, from detective thrillers and romances to fantasies and westerns. One day she brought home a novel by Isaac Asimov and at 12 years of age I was instantly hooked on science fiction. It was still the golden age of sci-fi so I got to read some of the now famous works of Heinlein, Clarke, Bradbury and other masters of classic science fiction.

We lived in simpler times. No computers, video games or anything like that and there wasn't enough on television to fill our day. So we spent time actually playing and being creative; making up games, drawing pictures and even writing our own stories. By the time I was in high school I had decided that I would one day write a science fiction novel. After a few failed attempts at short stories resulting in some rather insulting rejection notices, I put that dream on hold.

I never gave up, though. I continued to write. Radio scripts, magazine articles, training manuals, even Junior High Sunday School lessons. With some encouragement from my wife Donna, I decided to take a stab at a novel again a few years ago.

My challenge was to write, not only a good science fiction story, but one that would embrace the Black Experience. It would be about time travel,

so I needed an historical event to anchor the story. I was hoping to create as much of a "wow" factor in the history covered as with the science fiction. I found such an event that few people knew of, a little known but very significant race riot that took place early in the 20th Century in Chicago's Black Belt, an area now known as Bronzeville.

Now, I needed some interesting characters. I came up with Simmie Johnson, a young man born the son of a slave, working on a railroad construction gang 20 some years after the Civil War. What's special about him? He was part of the .01% of the population born with a superior mind, a genius, a real challenge for a black man in the 1880's. He manages to get an education and in his studies and research, discovers the secret of time travel and even designs a time machine, which he called a Chronocar. But this vehicle required technology that did not exist in his time.

Later in the story, about a hundred and thirty years later in fact, a young African American Illinois Institute of Technology student stumbles upon Dr. Johnson's plans and builds a working Chronocar that he uses to go back in time to visit Johnson in the year 1919, just when the riot is about to begin.

The result is a story that has been praised and enjoyed by many. Even though much of it is loosely rooted in fact (the result of many hours of research), it is a fictional version of the events that took place during the Red Summer of 1919. Still, *The Chronocar* has actually helped to open the eyes of many to what life was like for blacks back then, and to the fact that Chicago suffered the bloodiest race riot in the city's history in that year.

BLACK AMERICA IN THE 1800'S

“History is written by the winners.” --*Napoleon Bonaparte*

When I was a kid in school back in the middle years of the 20th Century, a lot of what we learned about slavery and the Civil War was quite whitewashed (pun intended). We got the idea that slavery was a bad thing, but no one would dare teach us the true horrors. Our history books didn't even scratch the surface when it came to the brutality and inhumanity. It wasn't until Alex Haley's *Roots* TV program in the 1980's that we got the first glimpse of what a nightmare slavery really was.

Back in the day, we were taught that Abraham Lincoln, the author of the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves, was the Negro's great

hero, that we owed our lives and liberty to him. I also recall as a young student, believing that once the slaves were freed, life was suddenly better for them, that they had instantly become equal Americans, even as my life in the West Side ghetto of Chicago was far from idyllic.

What we were taught about Lincoln was not quite true. In one of his debates with Stephen A. Douglass, Lincoln is quoted as saying, "I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races." He believed slavery to be morally wrong, but he was not for equality; he actually wanted to send all the blacks back to Africa. Besides, the true purpose of the emancipation was to undermine the Confederacy. There were actually states, some above the Mason-Dixon Line, like Delaware, that were exempt.

Even though the idea of Black History Week dates back to 1926, I was an adult by the time Black History Month became a national observance.² As more and more facts and details of history were revealed through books and television documentaries, I was soon dismayed to learn that many of our founding fathers like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and yes, even George Washington were at some point themselves slave owners.³

So the "facts" of history depend on who's telling the story.



After Emancipation, ex-slaves were suddenly free, supposedly. But how free can you be with no education, no resources, and nowhere to go? Many stayed on and worked for the same masters, getting a pittance in compensation while others even remained voluntarily enslaved because they simply did not know any other way. Some tried to take control of their lives, leaving the plantation and finding other ways to survive.

This was how the character Simmie Johnson, ended up working on a

railroad construction gang in the years following the Civil War. Usually blacks and Chinese workers did the heaviest, dirtiest of work, while the whites laid rails. Simmie swung a big hammer and drove the spikes that held the track in place, because he was big, strong and so good at it.

But Simmie was not your ordinary laborer. He was one of the extremely rare individuals on the planet born with the mind of a genius. I won't give away any key elements of the story here, but suffice it to say that Simmie suffered the fate of many black men in the South at that time (and as recently as the 1960's); he was forced to run for his life after inadvertently offending a white person.

Again, no spoilers here. I'll just say that this genius of a man manages to get an education and reasons out the secret of time travel and designs a Chronocar that he cannot build himself.

THE RED SUMMER

The other protagonist of *The Chronocar*, Tony Carpenter, is a black Illinois Tech student in the year 2015. He discovers Dr. Johnson's plans and builds a working Chronocar. His research helps him locate Dr. Johnson in the year 1919 and he takes the time machine back to that year to see the doctor to show him his great invention. There he also meets and becomes enamored with Dr. Johnson's lovely daughter, Ollie.

1915 is thought to be the year when the Great Migration began. Thousands of blacks moved north, looking for freedom and opportunity. In a few short years, the black population of Chicago more than doubled from about 44,000 to over 100,000. The Great War (World War I) was still raging, and thousands of men were still away fighting. Factories, warehouses and mills needed workers to keep running and many of the blacks were able to fill the gap left by the white men who had gone to fight.

Then the war ended and the soldiers came home. White men, many Irish immigrants, returned to find that blacks had taken many of the jobs and were spreading out on the South Side. Economic pressure revived years of racial hatred and things just got worse as time went on.

It was the summer of 1919, the so called Red Summer, when things came to a head. A teenage boy named Eugene Williams decided to go swimming at the beach on 29th Street with some friends on a hot day in July.

They found a home made raft under the pier and used it to paddle their way into the cool waters of Lake Michigan. They were pretty much minding their own business until they inadvertently strayed over the invisible but clearly understood line into the "whites only" waters to the South. Some young white men began throwing rocks at them, and Eugene was hit in the head with a piece of brick. He slid into the water and drowned. His friends panicked and made their way back to the beach and told the black lifeguard what had happened. The police showed up as tensions between the crowds of whites and the blacks grew. Eugene's friends pointed out the white man who threw the fatal missile, but the white policemen refused to do anything about it. A little later, when an altercation broke out between a white man and a black man, the police arrested and beat the black man.

The resulting riot lasted 7 days. State Militia was called in to help quell the violence. 15 whites and 23 blacks were killed and more than 500 people (mostly black) were injured. 1,000 black families were burned out of their homes.⁴



Irish “clubs” were known to be major players in the violence against blacks: “One of the riot's great mysteries is whether the city's future boss of bosses, Richard J. Daley, participated in the violence. At the time, Daley belonged to the Hamburgs, a Bridgeport neighborhood club whose members figured prominently in the fighting. In later years, Daley repeatedly was asked what he did during the riots. He always refused to answer.”⁵

Chicago was not the only city to suffer riots during the Red Summer of 1919. Race riots broke out in Washington, D.C.; Knoxville, Tennessee; Longview, Texas; Phillips County, Arkansas; and Omaha, Nebraska⁶

HAVE THINGS CHANGED IN 100 YEARS?

“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” --*George Santayana*⁷

Some will say things are just as bad as ever, that nothing has really changed, but I don't believe that to be true. In recent years I've lived in neighborhoods where I wouldn't have been welcomed 40 or 50 years ago. Chicago has seen 2 black mayors and our nation elected a black president—twice. It's safe to say that there would have been zero chance of either 50 or more years ago. Representation of blacks (and other ethnic groups) in business, entertainment, law enforcement, etc., is significantly better, although there is always room for improvement.

Still, over the decades, the bloody race riots have continued. From 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma and 1943 in Detroit to the historic Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965. I was personally a witness to race riots in Chicago during the 1960's. I vividly recall, as a teen, watching out of my bedroom window whilst an angry crowd came down Roosevelt Road on the West Side. "Word on the street" had been that there would be trouble and folks were told to stay inside. I watched in dread and despair as the mob broke windows and looted stores, including the little candy shop across the street that was run by the Swedish lady who was known to give free candy to kids when they had no money. Two years later, we lived only three blocks from the inferno that was Madison Street the day Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. I can still see the orange glow in the sky as we watched from our back porch, ready to grab our valuables and get out if the flames were to spread south. Fortunately it never came our way.

By the time I got to college, it seemed as if the days of the race riots were over. But the only thing that really changed was the proliferation of video cameras and eventually smart phones. Outrages like the beating of Rodney King in 1992 were captured on video for the world to see. In response, the violence returned.

So even though I personally feel safer in almost any neighborhood in Chicago than before, and opportunities are much better, the violence remains. Because many of the inequities remain. In the 21st Century, when I had hoped racial prejudice and strife would be little more than history, these evils are rearing their ugly heads again. The racism that I thought and hoped was dead is now manifesting itself subtly and openly in our institutions and flourishing hate groups. Not only is it dangerous to be Black in America; now you have

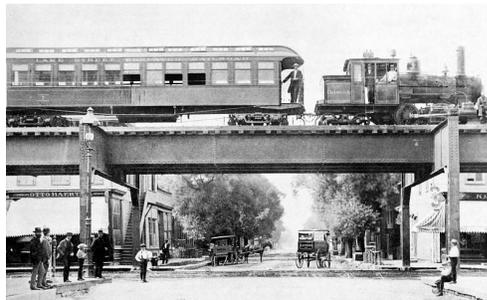
to be wary if you're Muslim, Latino, gay, female, or even a little child.

Or, to put it in the words of French critic and novelist Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr; “the more things change, the more they stay the same”⁸

HISTORICAL PLACES AND THINGS

In *The Chronocar*, Tony Carpenter takes his time machine back nearly 100 years. He is surprised at what he sees. Like many present day Chicagoans, he had no idea how long some things have been around.

The “EL”



Tony is shocked to see the 47th Street elevated station in 1919. But the elevated trains have been around for a very long time. The first elevated line opened in 1892 and went from Congress Street downtown south to 39th street. This was, of course, before electric trains; the first “el” was pulled by a small steam engine. This was followed by elevated lines to the West and Northwest sides of the city, and later a line was built that encircled the downtown area called The Union Loop or as we know it now, just The Loop (yes, the area is named after the elevated line).⁹ Originally these lines were owned by different private transit companies, and the buses and street cars were separately operated. It wasn't until 1945 that an Act of the General Assembly of the State of Illinois created the Chicago Transit Authority, finally unifying the city's transit system.¹⁰

Incidentally, the portion of the CTA Green Line that runs over Lake Street is the oldest existing elevated line, put into service in 1893.¹¹ How has it survived that long? Turns out it was built using what was then a new riveted plate steel construction method that was perfected a few years earlier in the building of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France.¹²

Downtown Chicago



Dr. Simmie Johnson takes Tony Carpenter for a ride in the summer of 1919, and Tony is surprised again at what he sees. As they drive North on Michigan Avenue, they pass the Art Institute, complete with the lions. The beach comes all the way up to the street and the trees that are there are little more than saplings. State and Madison is a nightmarish traffic jam of cars, streetcars, trucks, and horse drawn carriages. He also sees the Marshall Field's store and the amazing Chicago Theatre sign, looking pretty much the same as now.

Illinois Institute of Technology

Tony is an IIT student in 2015. As their tour of the city ends, Tony coaxes Dr. Johnson to turn onto 35th Street and they see, not IIT but the Armour Institute, which opened in 1893. IIT was a merger of the Armour and Lewis Institutes in 1927. They park on 31st street across from today's Main Building and alongside Machinery Hall where Tony's adventures continue.¹³

There were several early African-American graduates of Lewis, Armour, and Chicago-Kent College of Law. As there were numerous African-Americans enrolled in Lewis and Armour when they merged, IIT has always had blacks in its student body¹⁴

White City



I was surprised when I discovered in my research that there had been a major amusement park on the South Side at that time. White City, which stood at the corner of 63rd and Cottage Grove, featured many rides and attractions left over from the Columbian Exposition of 1893. It had a huge Ferris wheel, at least one roller coaster and a wooden escalator that took you to the top of the Shoot the Chutes ride. An alabaster tower stood at one end topped with a sweeping searchlight. It must have been an amazing site and a fun time.

TIME TRAVEL, SCIENCE FICTION AND HISTORICAL FICTION

A surprising number of people who say they hate science fiction have enjoyed reading *The Chronocar*. Some have said that it seems more historical fiction than science fiction.¹⁵ The big surprise to me is how differently people see the same story. It really makes no difference what you think it is as long as you enjoy it.

I believe the reason people who seem to dislike science fiction enjoy *The Chronocar* is because science fiction has been so diluted and confused in recent years that few people know what real science fiction is. Popular culture lumps everything from Tolkien fantasy, Marvel superheroes to horror into the same pot as science fiction. Not so. In a true science fiction story, the science, whether real or imaginary, must be central to the story; so much so that if you removed it, the story would fall apart. There is little or no science in fantasies and most superhero and horror stories. In fact, by that definition, Star Wars is not science fiction.¹⁶

Historical fiction, I feel, is based on people who can exist in the same time in history. For example, a story about Harriet Tubman meeting

Abraham Lincoln would be historical fiction. They were contemporaries and Tubman actually had the opportunity to meet Lincoln but refused.¹⁷ In *The Chronocar*, Tony Carpenter is a man from the year 2015 meeting with Dr. Johnson almost a century in the past. This could only be possible through time travel. They have to deal with each other's differences and Tony's modern technology (his smartphone) gets him in trouble. That is science fiction.

At a critique reading of a chapter of *The Chronocar* before it was published, one of my fellow writers ripped into the time travel theories that are the basis of the book. Being a very learned man himself, he challenged the science of time travel as discovered by Dr. Johnson and was concerned that people reading it would believe it to be true. I thanked him. I have since had others pull me aside and ask if the theories in the book were true. Of course they are not. It is, after all, science *fiction*. The theory and mechanism of time travel in *The Chronocar* were designed to serve the story, not to offer any competition to current scientific theory.

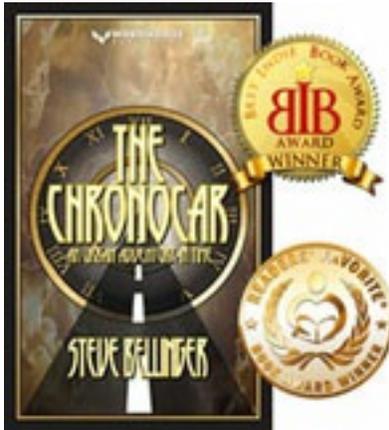
Is time travel possible? The late Dr. Stephen Hawking theorized a way to travel to the future by finding and interacting with the event horizon of a black hole. When you get back home, it would be years in the future. But you could never go back to the past. This actually makes sense, but the nearest black hole is some 27,000 light years away, so it's still rather problematic. There really is no way you can climb into a time machine, whether it be a metal sphere, hot tub or telephone booth and travel back in forth in time at will. At least, I don't believe it's possible.

Except in science fiction.

--*Steve Bellinger*

Footnotes

1. [http://www.history.com/news/5-things-you-may-not-know-about-lincoln-slavery-and-
emancipation](http://www.history.com/news/5-things-you-may-not-know-about-lincoln-slavery-and-
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3. <http://www.revolutionary-war.net/slavery-and-the-founding-fathers.html>
4. <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/chicago-race-riot-of-1919>
5. [http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/chi-chicagodays-raceriots-
story-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/chi-chicagodays-raceriots-
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7. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/George_Santayana
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12. Borzo, Greg. The Chicago "L". Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2007 P11.
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15. <http://www.blacksci-fi.com/review-chronocar/>
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17. <http://civilwarsaga.com/harriet-tubman-didnt-like-abraham-lincoln/>



**August 2015
Black Science Fiction Society
Book of the Month**

**2018 Best Indie Book Award
Science Fiction Category**

**Readers' Favorite
Gold Medal Award
YA Science Fiction**

“Incredibly clever!” –Rick Kogan, columnist, *Chicago Tribune*, host of *After Hours with Rick Kogan* on WGN radio

“An inherently engaging and entertaining read from beginning to end, "**The Chronocar**" showcases author Steve Bellinger's genuine flair for originality and narrative driven storytelling.” –*Midwest Book Review*

"**THE CHRONOCAR** defies many expectations - the plot moves along at a brisk pace, tropes are used in creative ways, and the ending contains a twist worthy of THE TWILIGHT ZONE."

--Gordon Dymowski, *Blog THIS, Pal!*

“This exciting time-travel tale kicks ass! ...it reads like a thriller, complete with a wicked twist that slaps the reader upside the head.”

– *Seth Chambers, author, We Happy Few, and many other sci-fi novels*

"In a twist, the ending solves the time travel paradox...believable and satisfying..." --*Sue Burke, author,*

Semiosis

The Chronocar is currently part of the collection and the archives of the Galvin Library at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, Illinois.



From Chapter One of
The Chronocar
by Steve Bellinger
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Straw Boss called out “Quittin’ time!” just before the whistle blew. Thirty shirtless exhausted men, their brawny bodies gleaming with sweat in the hot Mississippi sun, stopped what they were doing, not wanting to give the company a minute more than what they were getting paid for. It was a typical railroad work gang: coolies from China carried and placed the heavy ties, their bowed heads covered in traditional straw hats, and the Irishmen were trusted with actually laying the track. But the Negro men did the hardest and dirtiest work—digging ditches, moving big rocks, and some were allowed to pound in the spikes that fastened the iron to the wooden ties. Three-and-a-half miles of fresh railroad track lay behind them, and nobody had died. It had been a good day.

Simmie Johnson was in mid-swing. His herculean arms glistened in the sun as he brought the big hammer down. His cousin Willie held the stake in place and barely got his hand away as Simmie punched it several inches into the ground with a loud plink! Only one more stroke to go.

Simmie wielded the heavy mallet with ease. He was a tall, buff, handsome young black man, with a gentile nature about him, qualities that did not go unnoticed by young females. But Simmie had no time for women. Not now, at least. He had more important things to concern himself with, like finishing up here, collecting his pay, and getting home. The time would soon come when he would leave this dreadful life behind and make something of himself. Soon, very soon.

“Come on, Simmie,” Willie called. “We done fo’ today.”

Simmie followed Willie and the other weary workers to the tool wagon, where they surrendered their picks, shovels, and hammers to Straw Boss, a wiry middle-aged sunburned white man who had earned his position solely through his heritage.

“Put mine in the corner,” Willie said as he handed in his pick. “I want to use the same one next week.” Straw Boss threw Willie’s pick onto the pile.

“Hurry up, Simmie.” Willie tugged his arm, as Simmie lifted the heavy

hammer to Straw Boss, who almost toppled out of the wagon from the weight. A minute later, they were standing in line at the pay wagon where Old Mr. Sykes distributed the wages.

Sykes was a chubby old man who wore thick spectacles and a green eyeshade that framed his balding head. "Okay, Willie J." Sykes adjusted his glasses and licked his thumb. Then he peeled off dollar bills and counted out coins as he read off Willie's pay record. "Five dollars and seventy-five cents."

"Thank ya, suh." Willie bowed, which was a slight gesture since his back naturally bent forward.

"Simmie Johnson," Sykes said as he flipped through the book. Simmie stepped forward. "Here you go—seven dollars and twenty-five cents."

"Thank you," Simmie said, wondering why he should thank the man for giving him the money he had worked so hard to earn.

"Wait!" Willie grabbed Simmie's arm and glared at Sykes. "Why he get more than me?"

"You didn't show up for work on Wednesday," Sykes said flatly, "and you left early yesterday. Lucky I don't fire you!"

Willie frowned. "White man tryin' to cheat me," he mumbled as they stepped out of line.

"He's not trying to cheat you." Simmie sighed. "You've got to work a full day to get a full day's pay."

"You as bad as him," Willie said, stuffing the money into his pocket. "Come on, let's go get somethin' to drink."

Simmie carefully folded his money, placed it in a tattered envelope, and slipped it into his pocket. "I told you before, I don't drink, and I don't carouse around."

"Naw, man, I mean let's go to Ol' Ben's and get a cold pop."

Simmie saw no harm in that, so they started down the dusty road toward town. Willie talked Black Pete into joining them. Black Pete was big, dark-skinned, and had even less sense than Willie. Simmie walked a few paces ahead of them, lost in thought.

"The quantity of motion, which is collected by taking the sum of the motions directed towards the same parts, and the difference of those that are directed to contrary parts, suffers no change from the action of bodies among themselves."

"Hey, Simmie!"

“What?” Simmie said, annoyed at the interruption.

“How come it is that you so smart?” Willie asked.

“What?”

“I mean, you can read, you can do ‘cipherin’. You about as smart as any white man.”

Simmie stopped and looked at him. “Maybe smarter.”

“But why?” Willie said.

“Yeah, why?” Black Pete parroted.

Simmie shrugged. “I guess the good Lord saw fit to bless me with a good mind.”

“But why?” Willie asked again.

“I don’t know, ask him!” Simmie pointed toward the sky as he started walking again.

“Don’t make no sense,” Willie puzzled. “Why would the Lord give them kinds of smarts to a colored man?”

“What in the hell are you talking about, Willie?” Simmie stopped walking again.

“You smart, Simmie. Smarter than all the white men we works for. But what can you do with it?”

Simmie turned and resumed his pace. “I got plans.” He put his hand in his pocket and felt the envelope with money inside. Just a little more money and he could get away from this place. Then, finally, he could put his mind to work. No more pretending to be stupid just to stay out of trouble with the white man.

“What kind of plans?” Willie asked.

“I got plans. Don’t you worry about what kind. They are my plans. Hopefully, it is God’s will that I see them through.”

“So you do believe they’s a God, right?”

“Now, what kind of question is that?” Simmie scowled. “I’m the one who has to read the scriptures to you every night.”

“Big Momma say you don’t believe. Big Momma say you a heathen!”

“A heathen!” Black Pete echoed.

“Big Momma,” Simmie scoffed. “What does she know?”

“She say you study the devil,” Willie said softly.

“The devil,” Black Pete whispered.

“Now why would she say that?”

“‘Cause she found that book under yo’ bed.”

Simmie turned and faced Willie. “What book?” he asked, knowing full well which book. He only owned two. And what was Big Momma doing going through his things?

“That... prince book.” Willie cringed under Simmie’s glare.

“*The Principia*? She found my *Principia*?” he asked, carefully using the pronunciation that Miss Abigail had taught him six years ago.

Willie looked around to make sure no one could hear him. “She said all the crazy writin’ and the lines and circles and numbers was all the work of the devil!”

“Man, what you been doin’?” Black Pete cried.

“Big Momma don’t know... What did she do with my book?” Simmie snatched Willie by the collar. “What did she do with my book?”

“Sh-she burned it,” Willie said meekly.

“Good thang!” Black Pete said.

“Shut up, Pete!” Simmie bellowed, and Black Pete cowered away. “She burned my book?” He imagined his prize possession aflame. One of the most important things he owned, the thing that sparked his dream of starting a new life. He felt a tightening in his gut.

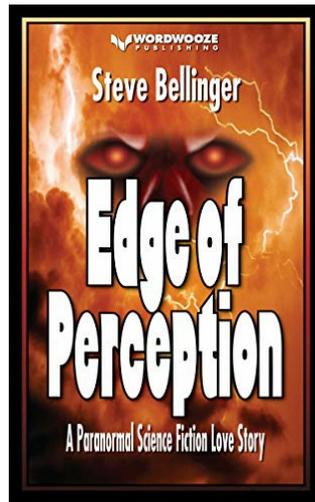
“She said it was the work of the devil and that it was goin’ to ruin yo’ soul. She burned it to protect you, to keep you and all the rest of us from goin’ to hell!”

“She burned my book?” Simmie roared as he raised a fist.

“Don’t hit me! I didn’t do it!” Willie cried. “Big Momma did!”

Simmie released Willie and tried to calm himself. His *Principia*! He had had that book since he was twelve years old when he rescued it from the trash behind the town library. So what if the pages were tattered and the cover was torn off? It was his book! He had begged Miss Abigail, the teacher at the white children’s school, to teach him to read, just so he could discover what that book was all about. After he’d breezed his way through all of the readers and textbooks she had, he showed her his *Principia*. She’d looked at it and dismissed it as nonsense, which Simmie found to be odd since she had heard of it and even knew the correct pronunciation of the title. It turned out that she had never actually seen a copy of it before, and young Simmie was able to understand it all better than she could. And the knowledge! The wisdom! Written two hundred years ago by Sir Isaac Newton, a genius of a man! It was as valuable to Simmie as his Bible. For over six years he coveted that book, and now Big Momma, in her senile ignorance, had destroyed it.

Fortunately, Simmie had it all memorized.



“**Edge of Perception** has every ingredient of a brilliant novel, from the unique story line filled with tension, surprises and well-placed conflict to the colorful and interesting characters.

You do not need to be a fan of paranormal novels to enjoy this book. The characters, story line and thought-provoking subject matter will send shivers down your spine. Highly, highly recommended.”

--Readers Favorite



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**From Chapter One of
*Edge of Perception***

by
Steve Bellinger
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I'm not psychic. Sometimes I wished I were, but I'm not. Oh, I've experienced some weird stuff in my life, more than once, but that's different. I had no control over that. I mean if I could read minds, predict the future, manipulate spirits or something, then maybe I'd at least have seen it all coming and even figure out a way to avoid it. For whatever reason I just seemed to attract this weird stuff. And strange people. Like Deloris. Beautiful, sexy, sweet, Deloris. She was everything a man would want in a woman, and I loved her madly. Why did she have to turn out to be crazy as a bedbug?

It didn't all start with her. It was back in the 1960s when I had my first encounter, the first time I saw *the thing*. At least that's my earliest memory of it. I was four or five years old, living in the ghetto on the West Side of Chicago. It didn't take long to figure out that it only came at bedtime and only when it was raining outside with thunder and lightning. If the night was calm, or if there was only a mild shower, everything would be okay. But if the man on the radio said there would be thunderstorms that night, I knew it would come.

It had been another steamy Friday of a very hot summer. I usually spent my days at Miss Hickman's house, she would babysit me while my mother worked at Sears. I didn't have a daddy, or at least I didn't know who the son-of-a-bitch was, which was fine by me. From what I had seen having a father was not all that it was cracked up to be; at least there wasn't some half-drunk man coming home at night beating up on *my* mother. I was the man of the house and that was how I liked it.

On this particular day Mama let me play a little longer than usual at Miss Hickman's house. But she was there as soon as the street lights came on to take me home to our third-floor cold water tenement on Miller Street, a neighborhood affectionately known as Jew Town.

I remember her rushing me home through the darkening streets, before the half-drunken men and the teenage boys would come out for the night. The air was thick and the wind was blowing from the south, so you could smell the stockyards. I couldn't understand how something that tasted so good when it was cooked could smell so bad when it was alive. I could hear the noise of wild unsupervised kids playing in the alleys, and noisy cars and motorcycles racing up and down the street. And almost always there was some kind of siren somewhere in the distance.

I was too young to fully realize it at the time, but life was pretty tough back then. Those who lived on the South Side thought that the West Side was the most dangerous place in the city and West Siders were deathly afraid of the South Side. White people would generally not venture to either, especially after the sun went down, unless they ran a store or some other kind of business. Or were cops.

The irony was you had to live there to really understand how bad it was, but if it was the only reality you knew, well, you may not understand what you were missing. The "American Dream" as seen on television and in the movies just sort of washed over us poor colored folk.

Mama let me sit and look at my comic books at the kitchen table while she made dinner. It was one of my favorites, a nice beef stew with big chunks of potatoes and little meat squares that were not too chewy.

While I ate she heated water in pots on the stove for my bath. She dragged the big metal tub to the middle of the kitchen floor and filled it with about four inches water, mixing hot and cold water until it was just right. I loved playing in the warm water and singing along with the odd little songs on the radio about beer and aftershave lotion while she got my pajamas ready.

"When am I going to get a big boy's bed, Mama?" I asked her as she tucked me into my second-hand wooden crib.

"Next year," Mama smiled. She leaned over and kissed me on the forehead and walked out.

I was nearly asleep when the booming thunder began to shake the building. The first time I remember seeing the *thing*, it was little more than a shadow. When the lightning flashes lit up the room, I saw something out of the corner of my eye. When I turned my head to look, it was gone. I was too young to understand what was going on, and after a few minutes the storm passed and I no longer saw it so I went to sleep.

As the months passed, the *thing* became a regular visitor during the nighttime storms. No longer just a fleeting shadow, it became a swirling mist above my bed, sometimes dancing along the ceiling until the storm was over. It'd scare me so bad that I'd run to Mama's room in tears and she'd let me sleep with her. Eventually I talked her into letting me sleep in her room whenever the man on the radio said there would be thunderstorms.

I recall Mama taking me to the doctor several times. At first he thought I was having fits or something, but the pills didn't help. Then, the doctor decided I was just having trouble sleeping, but the sweet, pink medicine made no difference either. Most nights I slept fine, anyway. It was only when it stormed and the thing came. The doctor didn't believe me. Never totally trusted doctors ever since.

Everything changed when I was almost six years old and Grandma came to live with us. She couldn't live alone anymore and she could watch me while Mama was at work, saving her the five dollars she gave Miss Hickman every week. Grandma got my room and I had to sleep in the front room. At least I finally got a real bed in the deal, but Mama wouldn't let me sleep in her bed anymore. I was getting to be too old for that, she said. She told me I had to be a brave little man and stay in my new second-hand bed. I really didn't mind, maybe the black thing wouldn't come if I was sleeping in a big boy's bed.

A week later there was a violent thunderstorm. The wind gusts made the metal blades on the venetian blinds sing, and the thunder rattled Grandma's little white porcelain figurines sitting on a shelf on the wall.

I was awake in bed staring at the ceiling. I saw a black spot above me that grew until it looked like a spinning black fog. Was it bigger this time or was it getting closer? It seemed to be just a couple of feet above me when two dim red spots appeared that looked like eyes. Burning eyes looking right at me. I tried to get out of bed but I couldn't move. I wanted to scream for Mama but nothing came out of my mouth.

What's the matter, boy? You scared?

I heard the voice, but the thing did not have a mouth. No, wait, I didn't hear it. The voice was in my head.

You are mine now, boy. You are mine!

I couldn't move. What was this thing? Why was it here? It was scaring me to death! The room got freezing cold as the swirl moved down towards the foot of the bed, its eyes still on me.

I am going to eat you up, boy! I am going to eat you up. Starting with your little toes!

I could feel the weight of the thing pressing on my feet. I was stiff and I felt something cold and heavy wrap around my feet. I just knew it was going to eat them! Just then the pressure lifted. The black mist twisted around as if to look out the window. The storm was moving away. The thing was shrinking, its eyes getting dimmer as it glided up to my face.

Don't you worry, boy. I will be back!

Then it blew out of the window.

Man, I jumped out of that bed as fast as I could and ran screaming into Mama's room.

"Mama! Mama! It's gonna eat me up!"

"What are you talking about?" she said, stirring from her slumber.

"That thing! That black thing came again! It's gonna eat me up!" I cried.

"Aw, baby!" Mama sat up and took me in her arms. "It's just another bad dream."

"It ain't no dream! It's real! I saw it! It tried to eat my toes!"

"Come on, baby." She got out of bed and took me by the hand.

"What's wrong with the child now?" Grandma said from her bed as we walked past her room.

"He's having nightmares again," Mama sighed.

"Ought not let him eat all that junk before he goes to bed."

I can remember how tired Mama looked when she walked me back to my bed and turned on the light. We searched all of the corners, behind the buffet and under the bed. "See?" she said, "nothing here."

"But it *was* here," I couldn't understand why she wouldn't believe me. "It only comes when it's thunder and lightning outside."

"Oh, Ronnie, baby," she let out a tired sigh. I followed her gaze to the big wet spot on the sheet. I felt the back of my pajama bottoms and started to cry.

"I'm sorry, Mama!" I sobbed quietly.

"It's okay, baby, I know you didn't mean it. You had a nightmare."

"But it was real, Mama! It was real!"

"Alright, okay," she said as she stripped the bed down to the rubber sheet. "You go get cleaned up while I fix this."

A few minutes later, I was back and ready to climb into my clean, dry

bed.

“I have to go in early tomorrow morning,” Mama said, “please go back to sleep.”

What else could I do? I climbed into bed and lay back down. Mama gave me a kiss on the forehead and left the room. I stared at the ceiling for I don’t know how long before I finally fell asleep.

The next day, while Mama was at work, I was playing with some empty thread spools, unsharpened pencils, and rubber bands on the kitchen floor while Grandma sat at the table, knitting.

“Ronnie child,” she said to me in her old voice. “What scared you so much last night?”

“It’s that black thing that comes every time there’s a storm outside. It’s like a big black cloud with little red eyes. It holds me down and says it’s going to eat me up. Mama and the doctor say it’s a bad dream, but it ain’t no dream, it’s real.”

She lay her knitting down the table. “Oh, Lord. It’s done come back.”

“What?”

“It’s the Tokoloshe.”

“Toko-what?”

“A long, long time ago, somebody put a curse on my granddaddy, back when they was slaves. They said that this little demon would visit upon our children for generation to generation. They called it the Tokoloshe. Lord, I thought we were done with all that mess.”

“Why would somebody put a curse on your granddaddy?”

“I don’t know, baby. But I know what to do. Go in my room, look on the floor in the closet, and bring me that little black box. Go on now, scoot!”

I got up ran into her room. I didn’t go in there often because it was so strange now. It smelled just like her; not a good or bad smell, just old. I opened the closet door. Her clothes were hanging neatly and she had some old, frilly-looking shoes on the floor covered with a thin layer of dust. I had only seen her wear them once to a funeral. In the corner was the little black wooden box. It was carved to look like a treasure chest, with dull metal fittings and a latch.

I carefully carried it back to her. “Here you go, Grandma.”

She wiped the dust off with her hand and undid the latch. After digging through some loose jewelry she took out this funny-looking thing. It was a piece of thick, roughly cut leather, about two inches square. The top half had

brass wrapped around it with little circles and half-moons hammered into the metal. A couple of copper wires snaked around below the brass. Attached to the bottom wire were five little dirty white cowrie shells resting on the leather. The whole thing was attached to a long twisted leather necklace.

“What’s that thing, Grandma?”

“This is called a juju. A talisman.”

“A tal-is a what?”

“A juju. When I was a child ‘bout your age, the Tokoloshe came to me and scared me half to death. My daddy, your great-grandfather, got this Voodoo woman to show him how to get rid of the Tokoloshe. She gave him this juju. And he used it to chase the Tokoloshe away. I thought that was the end of it. It didn’t come for your mother when she was a baby, so I thought it was over. But some kind of way it done come back.” She held up the talisman and examined it. “Now I want you to take this juju, right now, and go put it under your pillow. If that Tokoloshe comes back you just show him this juju and it will protect you.”

“Okay, Grandma,”

I was amazed by the juju thing. She gave it to me, so it had to be special. I was almost looking forward to the Tokoloshe coming back. Grandma’s magic was going to send it away for good.

Also from Steve Bellinger



The Edgy Writer's Workshop is a writer's group that meets in Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood. It's a group of writers; some published, some not, but all talented, who read and critique each other's work. In 2016 we decided to publish some of our own best works. The result is the *Over The Edge* Anthology; tales of suspense and the supernatural, of sane people in insane circumstances, and of those whose grip on reality has slipped — sometimes a little, sometimes a lot.

The contributing authors are Seth Chambers (founder of the group), Steve Bellinger (3 stories), Terrence Byrsa, Kevin B, Chatham, Samuel Durr, Karen Goldener, Derek Newhouse, Lori Parker and Anton Zaleski.

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About The Author



Steve Bellinger was born and raised on the West Side of Chicago by a single mom who worked nights for a printing company. She would bring home books and magazines to encourage him to read. This is how he discovered Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke and the other masters of classic science fiction. It didn't take long for him to get the itch to write. Over the years he's written everything from newspaper articles, comic strips and radio drama to short stories and fan fiction.



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