certainly these people are not really people at all, and have undergone a terrible sea change; the pods from space, a totally alien invasion of creatures who need no spaceships, can certainly also fit under the heading of the Thing Without a Name... and you might even say (if you wanted to stretch a point, and why the hell not?) that citizens of Santa Mira are no more than Ghosts of their former selves these days. Not bad legs for a book which is "just a story."

Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* defies any neat and easy categorization of analysis... and so far, at least, it has also defied the moviemakers, in spite of any number of options and scenarios, including Bradbury's own. This novel, originally published in 1962 and promptly given a critical pasting by critics in both the science fiction and fantasy genres,* has gone on through two dozen printings since its original publication. For all of that, it has not been Bradbury's most successful book, or his best-known one; *The Martian Chronicles, Fahrenheit 451*, and *Dandelion Wine* have probably all outsold it, and are certainly better known to the general reading public. But I believe that *Something Wicked This Way Comes,* a darkly poetic tall tale set in the half-real, half-mythical community of Green Town, Illinois, is probably Bradbury's best work—a shadowy descendant from that tradition that has brought us stories about Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, Pecos Bill, and Davy Crockett. It is not a perfect book; at times Bradbury lapses into the purple overwriting that has characterized too much of his work in the seventies. Some passages are self-imitative and embarrassingly formulaic. But that is a small part of the total work; in most cases Bradbury carries his story off with guts and beauty and panache.

*Not much new in this. Writers in the fantasy and science fiction genres mean about the critical coverage they get from mainstream critics—sometimes with justification, sometimes without—but the fact is most critics inside the genre are intellectual dorks. The genre magazines have a long and ignoble history of reprinting novels which are too large for the genres from which they've come: Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* took a similar pasting.*

And it might be worth remembering that Theodore Dreiser, the author of *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy,* was, like Bradbury, sometimes his own worst enemy... mostly because Dreiser never knew when to stop. "When you open your mouth, Stevie," my grandfather once said to me in despair, "all your guts fall out." I had no reply to that then, but I suppose if he were alive today, I would reply: That's 'cause I want to be Theodore Dreiser when I grow up. Well, Dreiser was a great writer, and Bradbury seems to be the fantasy genre's version of Dreiser, although Bradbury’s line-by-line writing is better and his touch is lighter. Still, the two of them share a remarkable commonality.

On the minus side, both show a tendency to not so much write about a subject as to bulldoze it into the ground... and once so bulldozed, both have a tendency to bludgeon the subject until all signs of movement have ceased. On the plus side, both Dreiser and Bradbury are American naturalists of a dark persuasion, and in a crazy sort of way they seem to bookend Sherwood Anderson, the American champ of naturalism. Both of them wrote American people living in the heartland (although Dreiser's heartland people come to the city while Bradbury's stay to home) of innocence coming heartbreakingly to experience (although Dreiser's people usually break, while Bradbury's people remain, although changed, whole), and both speak in voices which are uniquely, even startlingly American. Both narrate in a clear English which remains informal while mostly eschewing idiom—when Bradbury lapses occasionally into slang it startles us so much that he seems almost vulgar. Their voices are unmistakably American voices.

The easiest difference to point out, and maybe the most unimportant, is that Dreiser is called a realist while Bradbury is known as a fantasist. Even worse, Bradbury's paperback publisher insists tiresomely on calling him "The World's Greatest Living Science Fiction Writer" (making him sound like one of the freaks in the shows he writes about so often), when Bradbury has never written anything but the most nominal science fiction. Even in his space stories, he is not interested in negative-ion drives or relativity converters. There are rockets, he says in the connected stories which form *The Martian Chronicles, R Is for Rocket,* and *S Is for Space.* That is all you need to know and is, therefore, all I am going to tell you.
To this I would add that if you want to know how the rockets are going to work in any hypothetical future, turn to Larry Niven or Robert Heinlein; if you want literature—stories, to use Jack Finney's word—about what the future might hold, you must go to Ray Bradbury or perhaps to Kurt Vonnegut. What powers the rockets is Popular Mechanics stuff. The province of the writer is what powers the people.

All that said, it is impossible to talk of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, which is most certainly not science fiction, without putting Bradbury's lifework in some sort of perspective. His best work, from the beginning, has been his fantasy... and his best fantasy has been his horror stories. As previously mentioned, the best of the early Bradbury was collected in the marvelous Arkham House collection *Dark Carnival*. No easily obtainable edition of this work, the *Dubliners* of American fantasy fiction, is available. Many of the stories originally published in *Dark Carnival* can be found in a later collection, *The October Country*, which is available in paper. Included are such short Bradbury classics of gut-chilling horror as "The Jar," "The Crowd," and the unforgettable "Small Assassin." Other Bradbury stories published in the forties were so horrible that the author now repudiates them (some were adapted as comics stories and published, with a younger Bradbury's permission, in the E.C. horror comics). One of these involves an undertaker who performs hideous but curiously moral atrocities upon his "clients"—for instance, when three old biddies who loved to gossip maliciously are killed in an accident, the undertaker chops off their heads and buries these three heads together, mouth to ear and ear to mouth, so they can enjoy a hideous *kaffeeklatsch* throughout eternity.

Of how his own life influenced the writing of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Bradbury says: "*[Something Wicked This Way Comes]* sums up my entire life of loving Lon Chaney and the magicians and grotesques he played in the twenties films. My mom took me to see *Hunchback* in 1923 when I was three. It marked me forever, *Phantom of the Opera* when I was six. Same thing. *West of Zanzibar* when I was about eight. Magician turns himself into a skeleton in front of black natives! Incredible! *The Unholy Three* ditto! Chaney took over my life. I was a raving film maniac long before I hit my eighth year. I became a full-time magician after seeing Blackstone on stage in Waukegan, my home town in upper Illinois, when I was nine. When I was twelve, MR. ELECTRO and his traveling Electric Chair arrived with the Dill Brothers Sideshow and Carnival. That was his 'real' name. I got to know him. Sat by the lakeshore and talked grand philosophies... he his small ones, me my grandiose superstitions about futures and magic. We corresponded several times. He lived in Cairo, Illinois, and was, he said, a defrocked Presbyterian minister. I wish I could remember his Christian name. But his letters have long since been lost in the years, though small magic tricks he gave me I still have. Anyway, magic and magicians and Chaney and libraries have filled my life. Libraries are the real birthing places of the universe for me. I lived in my home-town library more than I did at home. Loved it at night, prowling the stacks on my fat panther feet. All of that went into *Something Wicked*, which began as a short story in *Weird Tales* called "Black Ferris" in May, 1948, and just grew like Topsy..."

Bradbury has continued to publish fantasy throughout his career, and although the Christian Science Monitor called *Something Wicked This Way Comes* a "nightmarish allegory," Bradbury really settles for allegory only in his science fiction. In his fantasy, his preoccupation has been with theme, character, symbol... and that fantastic rush that comes to the writer of fantasy when he puts the pedal to the metal, yanks back on the steering wheel, and drives his jalopy straight up into the black night of unreality.

Bradbury relates it this way: "*[Black Ferris' became] a screenplay in 1958 the night I saw Gene Kelly's *Invitation to the Dance* and so much wanted to work for and with him [that] I rushed home, finished up an outline of *Dark Carnival* (its then title) and ran it over to his house. Kelly flipped, said he would direct it, went off to Europe to find money, never found any, came back discouraged, gave me back my screen treatment, some eighty pages or more, and told me Good Luck. I said to hell with it and sat down and spent two years, off and on, finishing *Something Wicked*. Along the way, I said all and everything, just about, that I would ever want to say about my younger self and how I felt about that terrifying thing: Life, and that other terror: Death, and the exhilaration of both.

"But, above all, I did a loving thing without knowing it. I wrote a paean to my father. I didn't realize it until one night in 1963, a few years after the novel had been published. Sleepless, I got up and prowled my library, found the novel, reread
what this particular carnival is all about. The tale eventually narrows down to the struggle for a single soul, that of Jim Nightshade. To call it an allegory would be wrong, but to call it a moral horror tale—much in the manner of those E.C. horror tales which forewarn it—would be exactly right. In effect, what happens to Jim and Will is not so much different from Pinocchio's scary encounter on Pleasure Island, where boys who indulge their baser desires (smoking cigars and shooting spookers, for instance) are turned into donkeys. Bradbury in writing here of carnal enticements—not just sexual carnality, but carnality in its broadest forms and manifestations—the pleasures of the flesh run as wild as the tattooed illustrations which cover Mr. Dark's body.*

What saves Bradbury's novel from being merely a "nightmarish allegory" or a simplistic fairy story is its grasp of story and style. Bradbury's style, so attractive to me as an adolescent, now seems a bit oversweet. But it still yields a considerable power. Here is one of the passages which seems oversweet to me—

And Will? Why, he's the last peach, high on a summer tree. Some boys walk by and you cry, seeing them. They feel good, they look good, they are good. Oh, they're not above peeing off a bridge, or stealing an occasional dime-store pencil-sharpener, it's not that. It's just, you know, seeing them pass, that's how they'll be all their life; they'll get hit, hurt, cut, bruised, and always wonder why, why does it happen?

*The one reference to sexual carnality here occurs during the business of the Theater, which Bradbury declined to discuss in his letter to me, although I asked him if he would be so kind as to elaborate a bit. It remains one of the book's most tantalizing episodes. Jim and Will discover the Theater, Bradbury says, on the upper floor of a house "while they were monkey-climbing for the sweetest apples." Bradbury tells us that looking into the Theater changed everything, including the taste of the fruit, and while I have a tendency to bolt at the first whiff of graduate-school analysis like a horse smelling good water polluted with alkali, the apple-and-Eden metaphor here is too strong to be denied. What it is going on in this second- or third-floor room, this "Theater" that changes the taste of the apples, that so fascinates Jim of the dark name and his friend, whose Christian name is so associated with our supposed ability (our supposed Christ-like ability) to consciously command goodness in any given situation? Bradbury suggests that the Theater is one room in a whorehouse. The people inside are naked; they "let fall clothes to the rug, stood raw and animal-crazy, naked, like shivering horses..." If so, it is the book's most telling foreshadowing of the carnal deviation from the norm which so strongly attracts Jim Nightshade as he stands on the threshold of adolescence.

And this is the end for 1945.}
— and one that seems just right:

The walls of a lifetime were gathered in [that train-whistle] from other nights in other slumbering years; the howls of moon-dreamed dogs, the sleep of river-cold winds through January porches screens which stopped the blood, a thousand fire-sirens weeping, or worse! the out-gone shreds of breath, the protests of a billion people dead or dying, not wanting to be dead, their groans, their sighing, burst over the earth.

Man, that’s a train whistle! I want to tell you! More clearly than any other book discussed here, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* reflects the differences between the Apollonian life and the Dionysian. Bradbury’s carnival, which creeps inside the town limits and sets up shop in a meadow at three o’clock in the morning (Fitzgerald’s dark night of the soul, if you like), is a symbol of everything that is abnormal, mutated, monstrous… Dionysian. I’ve always wondered if the appeal of the vampire myth for children doesn’t lie partly in the simple fact that vampires get to sleep all day and stay up all night (vampires never have to miss Creature Features at midnight because of school the next day). Similarly, we know that part of this carnival’s attraction for Jim and Will (sure, Will feels its pull too, although not as strongly as his friend Jim feels it; even Will’s father is not entirely immune from its deadly siren song) is that there will be no set bedtimes, no rules and regulations, no dull and boring small town day after day, no “eat your broccoli, think of the people starving in China,” no school. The carnival is chaos, it is the taboo land made magically portable, traveling from place to place and even from time to time with its freight of freaks and its glamorous attractions.

The boys (sure, Jim too) represent just the opposite. They are normal, not mutated, not monstrous. They live their lives by the rules of the sunlit world, Will willingly, Jim impatiently. Which is exactly why the carnival wants them. The essence of evil, Bradbury suggests, is its need to compromise and corrupt that delicate passage from innocence to experience that all children must make. In the rigid moral world of Bradbury’s fiction, the freaks who populate the carnival have taken on the outward shapes of their inward vices. Mr. Cooger, who has lived for thousands of years, pays for his life of dark degeneracy by becoming a Thing even more ancient, ancient almost beyond our ability to comprehend, kept alive by a steady flow of electricity. The Human Skeleton is paying for miserliness of feeling; the fat lady for physical or emotional gluttony; the dust witch for her gossipy meddling in the lives of others. The carnival has done to them what the undertaker in that old Bradbury horror story did to his victims after they had died.

On its Apollonian side, the book asks us to recall and reexamine the facts and myths of our own childhoods, most specifically our small-town American childhoods. Written in a semipoetic style that seems to suit such concerns perfectly, Bradbury examines these childhood concerns and comes to the conclusion that only children are equipped to deal with childhood’s myths and terrors and exhalations. In his midfifties story “The Playground,” a man who returns magically to childhood is propelled into a world of lunatic horror which is only, after all, the corner playground with its sandbox and its slippery slide.

In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Bradbury interconnects this small-town American boyhood motif with most of the ideas of the new American gothic which we have already discussed to some extent. Will and Jim are essentially okay, essentially Apollonian, riding easy in their childhoods and used to looking at the world from their shorter height. But when their teacher, Miss Foley, returns to childhood—the first of the carnival’s Green Town victims—she enters a world of monstrous, unending horror which is not much different from that experienced by the protagonist of “The Playground.” The boys discover Miss Foley—or what remains of her—under a tree.

...and there was the little girl, crouched, face buried in her hands, weeping as if the town were gone and the people in it and herself lost in a terrible woods.

And at last Jim came edging up and stood at the edge of the shadow and said, “Who is it?”

“I don’t know.” But Will felt tears start to his eyes, as if some part of him guessed.

“It’s not Jenny Holdridge, is it?”

“No.”

“Jane Franklin?”
"No." His mouth felt full of novocaine, his tongue merely stirred in his numb lips. "...no...

The little girl wept feeling them near, but not looking up yet.

...me...help me...nobody'll help me...me...me...

I don't like this...somebody must help me...

someone must help her..." she mourned as for one dead, "...someone must help her...nobody will...

nobody has...terrible...terrible..."

The carnival "attraction" which has accomplished this malevolent trick is one that both Narcissus and Eleanor Vance could relate to: Miss Foley has been trapped in the carnival's mirror maze, imprisoned by her own reflection. Forty or fifty years have been jerked out from under her and she has been tumbled back into her own childhood...just what she thought she wanted. She had not considered the possibility of the nameless little girl weeping under the tree.

Jim and Will avoid this fate—barely—and even manage to rescue Miss Foley on her first foray into the mirror maze. One supposes it is not the maze itself but the carousel that has actually accomplished her doubling back in time; the mirrors in the maze show you a time of life you think you'd like to have again, and the carousel actually accomplishes it. The carousel can add a year to your age each time you go around or make you a year younger for every circle you make on it going backward. The carousel is Bradbury's interesting and workable metaphor for all of life's passages, and the fact that he darkens this ride, which is often associated with the sunniest pleasure we know as children, to fit the motif of this particular black carnival, causes other uneasy associations to come to mind. When we see the innocent merry-go-round with its prancing horses in this nether light, it may suggest to us that if time's passages are to be compared to a merry-go-round ride, then we see that each year's revolution is essentially the same as the last; it perhaps causes us to remember how fleeting and ephemeral such a ride is; and most of all it reminds us that the brass ring, which we have all tried so hard and fruitlessly to catch, is kept deliberately, tantalizingly, out of reach.

In terms of the new American gothic, we can see that the mirror maze is the catch-trap, the place where too much self-examination and morbid introspection persuades Miss Foley to step over the line into abnormality. In Bradbury's world—the world of Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show—there are no options: first caught in the glass of Narcissus, you then find yourself riding a dangerous carousel charger backwards into an untenable past or forward into an untenable future, Shirley Jackson uses the conventions of the new American gothic to examine character under extreme psychological—or perhaps occult—pressure; Peter Straub uses them to examine the effects of an evil past upon the present; Anne Rivers Siddons uses them to examine social codes and social pressures; Bradbury uses these self-same conventions in order to offer us a moral judgment. In describing Miss Foley's terror and grief in attaining the childhood she so desired, Bradbury goes far toward defusing the potential flood of sticky-sweet romanticism that might have destroyed his tale...and I think this defusing reinforces the moral judgments he makes. In spite of imagery that sometimes swamps us instead of uplifting us, he manages to retain his own clear point of view.

This isn't to say Bradbury doesn't make a romantic myth of childhood, because he sure does. Childhood itself is a myth for almost all of us. We think we remember what happened to us when we were kids, but we don't. The reason is simple; we were crazy then. Looking back into this well of sanity as adults who are, if not totally insane, then at least neurotic instead of out-and-out psychotic, we attempt to make sense of things which made no sense, read importance into things which had no importance, and remember motivations which simply didn't exist. This is where the process of myth making begins.*

Rather than trying to row against this strong current (as Golding and Hughes do), Bradbury uses it in Something Wicked This Way Comes: blending the myth of childhood with the myth of the dream-father, whose part is played here by Will's dad, Charles Halloway...and, if Bradbury himself is to be

*The only novels I can think of that avoid making childhood into a myth or a fairy tale and still succeed wonderfully as stories are William Golding's Lord of the Flies and A High Wind in Jamaica, by Richard Hughes. Someone will write a letter and suggest that I should have added either Ian McEwan's The Cement Garden or Beryl Bainbridge's Harriet Said, but I think that, in their differing ways (but uniquely British outlook), both of these short novels romanticize childhood as thoroughly as Bradbury ever did.
believed, who is also played by that Illinois power-linesman who was Ray Bradbury's Dad. Halloway is a librarian who lives his own life of dreams, who is enough boy to understand Will and Jim, but who is also enough adult to provide, in the end, what the boys cannot provide for themselves, that final ingredient in our perception of Apollonian morality, normality, and rectitude: simple accountability.

Childhood is the time, Bradbury insists, when you are still able to believe in things you cannot be true:

"It's not true anyway," Will gasped. "Carnivals don't come this late in the year. Silly darn-sounding thing. Who'd go to it?"

"Me."

Me, thought Will, seeing the guillotine flash, the Egyptian mirrors unfold accordions of light, and the sulfur-skinned devil-man sipping lava, like gunpowder tea.

They simply believe; their hearts are still capable of overruling their heads. They are still sure that they will be able to sell enough boxes of greeting cards or tins of Cloveher Salve to get a bike or a stereo, that the toy will really do all the things you saw it do on TV and that "you can put it together in just a matter of minutes with a few simple tools," or that the monster picture going on inside the theater will be as scary and wonderful as the posters and stills outside. That's okay; in Bradbury's world the myth is ultimately stronger than the reality, and the heart stronger than the head. Will and Jim stand revealed, not as the sordid, dirty, frightened boys of Lord of the Flies, but as creatures built almost entirely of myth, a dream of childhood which becomes more believable than reality in Bradbury's hand.

Through noon after noon, they had screamed up half the rides, knocked over dirty milk bottles, smashed kewpie-doll-winning plates, smelling, listening, looking their way through the autumn crowd trampling the leafy sawdust.

Where did they come by the werewithal for their day at the fair? Most kids in a similar situation have to count their finances and then go through an agonizing process of picking and choosing; Jim and Will apparently do everything. But once again, it's okay. They are our representatives in the forgotten land of childhood, and their apparently endless supply of cash (plus their dead-eye aim at the china plates and pyramids of milk bottles) are accepted with delight and little or no rational hesitation. We believe as we once believed that Pecos Bill dug the Grand Canyon one day when he came home tired, thus dragging his pick and shovel behind him instead of carrying them over his shoulder. They are in terror, but it is the unique ability of these myth-children to enjoy their terror. "They both stopped to enjoy the swift pound of each other's heart," Bradbury relates.

Cooger and Dark become Bradbury's myth of evil, threatening these children not as gangsters or kidnappers or any realistic bad guys; Cooger is more like Old Pew returned from Treasure Island, his blindness exchanged for a hideous fall of years that has been dropped upon him when the carousel goes wild. When he hisses at Will and Jim, "Ah...ssshhort...sad life...for you both!" we feel the sort of comforting chill we felt when the Black Spot was first passed at the Admiral Benbow.

Their hiding from the emissaries of the carnival, who come into town looking for them under the pretense of a free parade, becomes Bradbury's best summation of this childhood remembered in myth; the childhood that might really have existed in short bursts between long stretches of boredom and such hasty chores as carrying wood, doing dishes, putting out the trash, or sitting baby brother or sister (and it's probably significant to this idea of the dream-child that both Jim and Will are only children).

They...hid in old garages, they...hid in old barns... in the highest trees they could climb and got bored and boredom was worse than fear so they came down and reported in to the Police Chief and had a fine chat which gave them twenty safe minutes right in the station and Will got the idea of touring churches and they climbed all the steeple in town and scared pigeons off the bellfries... But there again they began to get starchy with boredom and fatigued with sameness, and were almost on the point of giving themselves up to the carnival in
order to have something to do, when quite fortunately the sun went down.

The only effective foil for Bradbury’s dream-children is Charles Halloway, the dream-father. In the character of Charles Halloway we find attractions which only fantasy, with its strong myth-making abilities, can give us. Three points about him are worth mentioning, I think.

First, Charles Halloway understands the myth of childhood the two boys are living; for all of us who grew up and parted with some bitterness from our parents because we felt they didn’t understand our youth, Bradbury gives us a portrait of the sort of parent we felt we deserved. His reactions are those which few real parents can ever afford to have. His parenting instincts are apparently supernaturally alert. Early on, he sees the boys in the carnival set up, and calls their names softly under his breath… but does no more. Nor does he mention it to Will later, although the two boys have been out at three o’clock in the morning. He’s not worried that they’ve been out scoring dope or mugging old ladies or stealing their girl friends. He knows they have been out on boys’ business, walking the night as boys sometimes will… and he lets it go.

Second, Charles Halloway comes by his understanding legitimately; he is still living the myth himself. Your father cannot be your pal very successfully, the psychology texts tell us, but there are few fathers, I think, who have not longed to be buddies with their sons, and few sons who have not wished for a buddy in their fathers. When Charles Halloway discovers that Jim and Will have nailed rungs under the climbing ivy on their respective houses so they can escape and re-enter their bedrooms after bedtime, he does not demand that the rungs be torn down, his response is admiring laughter and an admonition that the boys not use the rungs unless they really have to. When Will tells his father in agony that no one will believe them if they try to explain what really happened in Miss Foley’s house, where the evil nephew Robert (who is really Mr. Cooger, looking much younger since he has been reissaued) framed them for a robbery, Halloway says simply, “I’ll believe.” He will believe because he is really just one of the boys and the sense of wonder has not died within him. Much later, while rummaging through his pockets, Charles Halloway almost seems like the world’s oldest Tom Sawyer:

And Will’s father stood up, stuffed his pipe with tobacco, rummaged his pockets for matches, brought out a battered harmonica, a penknife, a cigarette lighter that wouldn’t work, and a memo pad he had always meant to write great thoughts down on but had never got around to…

Almost everything, in fact, except a dead rat and a string to swing it on.

Third, Charles Halloway is the dream-father because he is, in the end, accountable. He can switch hats, in the blink of an eye, from that of the child to that of the adult. He proves his accountability and responsibility by a simple symbolic act: when Mr. Dark asks, Halloway gives him his name.

“A fine day to you, sir!”
No, Dad! thought Will.
The Illustrated Man came back.
“Your name, sir?” he asked directly.
Don’t tell him! thought Will.
Will’s father debated a moment, took the cigar from his mouth, tapped ash and said quietly:
“Halloway. Work in the library. Drop by sometime.”
“You can be sure, Mr. Halloway. I will.”

[Halloway] was also gazing with surprise at himself, accepting the surprise, the new purpose, which was half despair, half serenity, now that the incredible deed was done. Let no one ask why he had given his true name; even he could not assay and give its real weight…

But isn’t it most likely that he has given his true name because the boys cannot? He must front for them—which he does admirably. And when Jim’s dark wishes finally lead him into what seems utter ruin, it is Halloway who emerges, first destroying the fearsome Dust Witch, then Mr. Dark himself, and finally leading the fight for Jim’s life and soul.

Something Wicked This Way Comes is probably not Brad-
shinks at the steady rate of one-seventh of an inch a day has really gone beyond even the furthest realms of science fiction.

Matheson, like Bradbury, has no real interest in hard science fiction. He brings forth an obligatory amount of mumbo-jumbo (my favorite is when a doctor exclaims over Scott Carey’s “incredible catastrophe”) and then drops it. We know that the process which eventually results in Scott Carey’s being chased through his own basement by a black widow spider begins when he is doused by a curtain of sparkling radioactive spray; the radioactivity interacts with some bug spray he had ingested into his system a few days earlier. It is this double play that has caused the shrinking process to begin. It is the most minimal nod at rationality, a mid-twentieth-century version of penta-grams, mystic passes, and evil spells. Luckily for us, Matheson, like Bradbury, is more interested in Scott Carey’s heart and mind than in his incredible catastrophe.

It’s worth noting that in The Shrinking Man we’re back to the old radioactive blues again, and to the idea that horror fiction helps us to externalize in symbolic form whatever is really troubling us. It is impossible to see The Shrinking Man separated from its background of A-bomb tests, ICBMs, the “missile gap,” and strontium-90 in the milk. If we look at it this way, Matheson’s novel (his second published book, according to John Brophy and John Clute, who collaborated on Matheson’s entry in The Science Fiction Encyclopedia, citing Matheson’s I Am Legend as the first; I believe they may have overlooked two other Richard Matheson novels, Someone Is Bleeding and Fury on Sunday), is no more science fiction than such Big Bug movies as The Deadly Mantis or Beggining of the End. But Matheson is doing more in The Shrinking Man than having radioactive nightmares; the title of Matheson’s novel alone suggests bad dreams of a more Freudian nature.

Concerning The Body Snatchers, we’ll remember Richard Gid Powers saying that Miles Bennell’s victory over the pods is a direct result of Miles’s resistance against depersonalization, his fierce individualism, and his defense of more traditional American values. These same things can be said about the Matheson novel, with one important variation. It seems to me that while

*Nor is this the only time that these two very different writers have taken up a similar theme. Both have written time-travel stories of men who are driven to escape a terrible present for a friendlier past. Finney’s Time and Again (1970),