

INTERSTATE DREAMS



NEAL BARRETT, JR

NEBULA AND HUGO AWARD-NOMINATED AUTHOR

INTERSTATE DREAMS

By Neal Barrett Jr.



MACABRE INK

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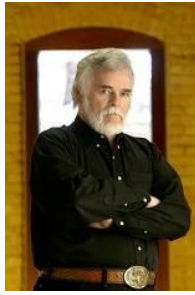
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Meet the Author



NEAL BARRETT, JR is an American treasure, a prolific author with a keen eye to character and the ability to make the improbable obvious. He has written over fifty novels and numerous short stories that span the field from mystery/suspense, fantasy, science fiction and historical novels, to "off-the-wall" mainstream fiction. Reviewers have defined his work as "stories that defy any category or convention..."

His "author's best" collection, "Perpetuity Blues," was a finalist for the 2001 World Fantasy Award.

His two fantasy novels featuring "Finn, the Lizard Master" have been published by Bantam---"The Prophecy Machine," in 2000, and "The Treachery of Kings" in 2001. These novels were based on "The Lizard Shoppe," which appeared in Dragon Magazine, and won the "best fiction of the year" award from The West Coast Publishers.

In addition to his appearance in numerous magazines, his work may be seen in collections such as The Best From Fantasy & Science Fiction, Nebula Awards, OMNI: Best Science Fiction, Asimov's Robots, Dark at Heart, The Year's Best Science Fiction (Fourth, Fifth, Seventh, Tenth and Eleventh Annual Collections), etc.

His novelette, "Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus" was a finalist for both the SFWA NEBULA Award, and the Hugo Award, for best novelette of the year, and his story "Cush" was a Hugo nominee.

His short story, "Stairs," received a Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award.

Barrett has a habit of crossing genre lines with his fiction. "Sallie C.," from The Best of the West, and "Winter on the Belle Fourche," from The New Frontier, were both chosen for Gardner Dozois' Year's Best Science Fiction.

His novel, "Through Darkest America," received acclaim from readers and critics alike. Reviewer Edward Bryant called it "A book of astonishing power...simply one of the best..."

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INTERSTATE DREAMS

PART ONE
MINNOWS, GUPPIES,
&
SHARKS

Chapter One

In the burgundy-colored van, the white man smoked and sorted colors in his head. Waited for a neat chromatic fix that might reveal the facts of life. Why cats don't seem to give a shit. Why girls don't like to fish. These would be good things to know, things that might lead to a better life for all.

The black man drove and watched the road. Didn't just *drive* like an ordinary man, like a man going down to the 7-Eleven store. Junior Lewis drove with heart, drove with his soul linked directly to the road. Driving was the second best thing he liked to do.

Dreamer didn't like to drive. He lacked dedication to the wheel, but he understood another man's needs. He liked to sit back and put his feet on the dash and watch Junior Lewis drive. Junior thought stopping off for gas was a pure aggravation, a precious waste of time. He didn't like to stop he liked to go. If a car didn't have to stop for gas, he'd drive straight through past Houston, Kansas and Fargo, North Dakota, up across the polar ice. Down the other side into Coldass, Russia, tires down to nothing, out of beer and barbecue. Rosy-cheeked girls would crowd around in furry hats. A girl with glacier eyes would say, "Hey, now, what's Junior Lewis doing here?"

Dreamer followed this scenario a mile or maybe two, losing interest fast when the Russian girl wouldn't cash a check. Leaned back and slid down easy in his seat. Watched Houston traffic slug along through the hot oppressive night. Watched the bright sulfur-eyed fish in a hydrocarbon sea. Wondered if a nuke would clear the air. Wondered if a girl in Oklahoma knew his name.

Dreamer watched Junior Lewis drive. Dreamer wished that he was black too. He felt he had a knack for darker skin, in spite of no talent for the dance. Junior had skin black as night. Not your common Hershey bar tone or a high yellow wimpy kind of black, but undiluted Kenya genes. In the stroboscopic light of passing cars, quicksilver washed the hard angles of his face. Dreamer thought it might be a Pharaoh's face, that Junior had likely done Egypt some time. He asked Junior once if Nefertiti rang a bell, if he had a thing for cats. Junior said he didn't know, said he couldn't quite recall.

All this quite coincidental with a Mako Binder sort of off-the-cuff aside the week before, Mako in Dreamer's Austin store to buy a matched pair of Red Devil Cichlids at a fairly hefty price. Mako Binder looking criminally intent in a Panama suit, and somehow spotting Dreamer's wish for greater soul. He said he felt Dreamer would fit right into nigger life. That he might give some thought to basketball. This without malice of any sort at all, simply mobster insight, storing up shit that could turn out useful sometime. Which was how Mako Binder stayed firmly at the top, in a business where retirement meant free fall without a gold watch.

Junior Lewis took a nip from his pint and passed it on, a pint in a brown paper sack.

"I guess not," Dreamer said, though a drink seemed proper at the time.

"Might just settle you some," Junior said.

"I feel I'm settled just fine."

"I see that you are."

"I got a firm handle on my needs. When I want a drink and when I don't."

"That's good."

"A man know his needs, he going to be a happy man."

Junior briefly took his eyes off the road. "What you ought to do, you ought to stop talking like that."

"Like what?"

"Dropping words and letters, then sticking one in that don't belong."

"You do it," Dreamer said.

"That's different, man. I got an ethnic obligation to talk the way I do."

"Well, see, that's it. I wish I did too."

"You lay off those *Jefferson* reruns awhile, you're going to be fine."

"I envy you minorities a lot. I feel incomplete."

"I've got this Mes'can friend works down on the Gulf," Junior said. "He can read English okay, but he's got this dyslectic tic he try to read any Mex. Doctors can't find a thing. They maybe going to write him up."

"This is the funny looking dude with one eye."

"Who you thinking about is Raoul. Raoul the man bet Sid Pink he could drive to LA buck naked without getting stopped. Which he did, except Sid tips the law and Raoul is out twenty-five grand and a couple of weeks in jail."

"Sid doesn't much like to lose."

"That is a fact."

Dreamer looked out the window at the soupy primal mix that passed for air. Traffic up ahead disappeared, lost in a deadly yellow veil.

"I wouldn't live in Houston on a bet," Dreamer said. "What you got right here, you got the asshole end of the world."

"Nobody going to argue that."

"You ought to come to Austin, get out of this place."

"That hippie dog life's not for me," Junior said. "I'm your big spending type. I got the need for finer things."

"Jesus," Dreamer said, "where you been, man? Austin isn't like that now, hasn't been fun for thirty years. All the old hippies wearing suits."

"You don't say."

"Come over there, you could eat at Mama Lucy's every night. Eat ribs and sing darky songs. You play any banjo at all?"