“Everybody I know wants to escape,” says the narrator at the beginning of one of Jack Finney’s short stories, “but they don’t wander down into any third level at Grand Central Station.” Those words instantly grabbed my attention. Even as a fifteen-year-old kid, I knew there wasn’t any third level at Grand Central Station. But before I had finished the story, by God I had willingly escaped there with its gentle narrator as my tour guide. So it was that “The Third Level,” a classic time travel tale, introduced me to the work of Jack Finney.

But wait—I remembered years before seeing an adaptation of another of his stories, “Such Interesting Neighbors,” on an old Science Fiction Theater television episode. Something about a family from the future moving in next door. I was just a kid, but it stuck in my memory.


Good heavens, Finney again.

There was no escaping him. Indeed, it seemed like he had always been around, waiting for me on that Third Level platform. I had no choice but to join him. Thirty-five years later I’m still there. And by now my book shelf groans under the weight of every edition of every one of his books.

For years I sought an interview. After being gently but firmly turned down when I called him at his home in Mill Valley, California, I eventually secured permission from his agent in New York City, Don Congden. Alas, Finney’s death at age 84 on November 16, 1995 put an end to that. Ever elusive, he left without sending a forwarding address.

Even in life, no one seemed to know much about him. Details remain sketchy: Born Walter Braden Finney in Milwaukee, he attended Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. After moving to New York City, where he worked in the advertising industry, he began publishing stories in popular magazines, like Colliers and The Saturday Evening Post. His first two novels, *Five Against the House* (1954) and *The Body Snatchers* (1955) were wild tales of adventure and horror that were quickly adapted for the movies. Finney relocated to Mill Valley, California, where he produced a succession of novels (*House of Numbers*, 1957; *Assault on a Queen* (1959); *Good Neighbor Sam*, 1963; *The Woodrow Wilson Dime* (1968); *Time and Again*, 1970; *Marion’s Wall*, 1973; *The Night People*, 1977; *From Time to Time*, 1995), short story collections (*The Third Level*, 1957; *I Love Galesburg in the Springtime*, 1963), and factual books (*Forgotten News: The Crime of the Century and Other Lost Stories*, 1983).

**The Body Snatchers in Print and On Screen**

Finney’s most famous book, *The Body Snatchers*, began humbly enough as a longish story in Collier’s magazine in 1954; a year later, it appeared in an expanded Dell paperback original. “I simply felt in the mood to write something about a strange event or a series of them in a small town,” recalled Finney. Due in part to the popular movie adaptation directed by Don Siegel a year later, Finney’s modest little tale quickly came to be regarded as a modern classic. Only Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* and Arthur Miller’s play, *The Crucible*, both written the year before, rival it as the essential literary expression of Cold War
paranoia.

By now the story is familiar. In the tiny town of Santa Mira, California (a 1976 edition relocated the action to Finney’s adopted home of Mill Valley), Dr. Miles Bennell is letting out his last patient of the day when a friend, Becky Driscoll, casually tells him her cousin Wilma has somehow gotten the idea that her Uncle Ira isn’t her uncle anymore. Indeed, there’s something strange about Uncle Ira. A little later, Becky is unsure about the identity of her own father. Similar reports concerning other townspeople come in. Psychiatrist Mannie Kaufman rationalizes it all away as a case of low-key mass hysteria. But what about the oddly uniformed body of a naked man that’s found on the pool table of Miles’ friend, Jack Belicec? And another pod-like form found in a cupboard in Becky’s basement? Eventually Miles learns these seed pods are alien life forms that have drifted through space and accidentally landed on planet Earth. “[They] are now performing their simple and natural function,” explains one of “them”—“which is to survive on this planet. And they do so by exercising their evolved ability to adapt and take over and duplicate cell for cell, the life this planet is suited for.”

From Santa Mira trucks will take more pods to surrounding areas, then to other cities, across the country, to other continents and beyond. Soon the earth will be populated by pod people, entities lacking emotions, beings bereft of the hungers of passion, hate, and love. And in a matter of a few years those life forms will turn to dust, leaving the planet as bare and lifeless as those that have come before. And the spores will move on again, back out into space….

Miles and Becky escape their captors and flee out of the valley, destroying unformed pods as they go. Suddenly, to their amazed relief, the sky is filled with pods detaching themselves from their stems and drifting back into the void from which they came. Resistance on the planet has apparently proven to be too much and the pods are, in effect, giving up and moving on: “And so now, to survive—their one purpose and function—the great pods lifted and rose,” says Miles’s narrative voice, “climbing up through the faint mist, on and out toward the space they had come from, leaving a fiercely implacable planet behind. . . .” Soon, Santa Mira is back to normal. Or is it?

In his study of the horror tale, Danse Macabre, Stephen King declares The Body Snatchers set the mold for the modern horror novel. Its method was to strike first one “off-key note,” quietly followed by another, then another: “Finally the jagged, discordant music of horror overpowers the melody entirely. But Finney understands that there is no horror without beauty; no discord without a prior sense of melody; no nasty without nice.” The connections between these polarities, however, can be tenuous: “[Finney] sews the seam with such fine stitchwork that when we cross over from the world that really is into a world of utter make-believe, we are hardly aware of any change. This is a major feat, and like the magician who can make the cards walk effortlessly over the tips of his fingers in apparent defiance of gravity, it looks so easy.”

The book has been adapted to the movies three times. For three-fourths of its length, Don Siegel’s classic 1956 version, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, is virtually an exact duplicate—dare I say, a “pod”?—of the characters, situations, and dialogue. Only the ending sharply departs from the literary original. Fleeing from the pursuing pod people, wildly shouting for help, Miles is arrested on suspicion of drunkenness and taken to a police station. But when a report comes in about an accident involving a truck
loaded down with strange seed pods, his story is confirmed and the police prepare to act. (Siegel’s original screenplay ended the film with Dr. Bennell pointing to the camera and yelling, “You’re next!”) Many viewers and commentators agree that this slam-bang finish is preferable to Finney’s gentle, anticlimactic bit of *deus ex machina.*

The 1978 Philip Kaufman adaptation is a kind of sequel, taking up the story from the point where Kevin McCarthy lurches down a highway, warning of an invasion. The pod plague is now spreading to the big city, San Francisco. The decision to switch locations is interesting: On the one hand, in the Siegel, the terrible anonymity of the alien life forms was thrown into sharp relief against the cozy intimacy of a small town; on the other hand, in the Kaufman, the aliens are perfectly at home in the conformity of San Francisco’s urban sprawl (a disturbing implication in its own right). Moreover, in a sly, satiric touch, the pods find ample places to hide in the chic houseplant-infested world of city dwellers! Sounding the alarm are a public health inspector, Matthew Bennell (Donald Sutherland) and his assistant, Becky (Brooke Adams). In a not-so-subtle allusion to the Siegel film, they attempt to escape on an outgoing ship after hearing voices from within singing “Amazing Grace.” But they are foiled when they witness pods being loaded on board. In an ironic twist, they flee the city in a cab driven by Don Siegel, in a cameo role! While the shock effects—including flashy cutting, graphic transformations, and startling aural blasts emitted by the pod people—are far more elaborate than those in the Siegel, and while the film had a far bigger budget, the pacing and the overall sense of mounting terror is more diffuse and therefore less effective.

Abel Ferrara’s 1994 version, reclaiming the book’s original title, *The Body Snatchers,* again changes the location, this time to a mysterious Army base located somewhere in the South. Dr. Malone (Terry Kinney), an Environmental Protection scientist, arrives to check out ongoing toxic experiments. He discovers men clandestinely loading odd, pod-like objects in the swamps onto trucks. Meanwhile, the base doctor (Forrest Whittaker) claims some of his patients have delusions that if they fall asleep, they’ll change into monsters. And worst of all, the scientist’s wife Marti (Meg Tilly) has herself been transformed into a soulless creature. As the base begins to crawl with these human substitutes, Dr. Malone flees with his daughter and son. After a terrific confrontation involving helicopters and ground vehicles, they escape to warn the world of what’s coming. Although the monstrous transformations are pretty slimy affairs, with moist tendrils sprouting from the pods to envelope and invade the forms of sleeping humans, the real horror of the picture arises from its quiet buildup and its exceptional visual style, its skewed visions of half-seen, spidery forms sprawling across the edges of the frame.

Novelist and filmmakers alike have objected to overt readings of the story and the films—particularly the Siegel version, which remains the most tautly successful—as an anti-Communist and/or anti-McCarthy parable. But there is too much supporting evidence to yield the point so easily. As Danny Peary has pointed out in his study of Siegel’s film, the space aliens fit all too closely the stereotypes held by Americans in the mid-1950s of Russians—“ice cold, outwardly peaceful but very authoritarian, emotionless.” On the other hand, their campaign to seek out and destroy the “nonconformists” like Dr. Bennell are likeHUAC’s investigations and subsequent blacklistings of suspected Communists.

There is even disagreement on where the
real terror of the thing lies. Horror film historian Carlos Clarens has pointed out that "the ultimate horror in science fiction is neither death nor destruction but dehumanization.... That the most successful SF films. . . seem to be concerned with dehumanization simply underlines the fact that this type of fiction hits the most exposed nerve of contemporary society: collective anxieties about the loss of individual identity. . . ." Countering this view is the rather more insidious suggestion by historian Vivian Sobchack that there is emotional appeal in being "taken over," as it were: "[The] emotional attraction is 'no more responsibility.' Being 'taken over' can be likened to being drafted, to having to follow orders. 'Taken over,' we cannot be held accountable for our crimes—passionate or passionless." Perhaps the latter view conveys the most terrifying implication of all.

Twists in Time

Finney’s time-travel tales deserve a special place in the literature. As early as his seminal short story collections, The Third Level (1957) and I Love Galesburg in the Springtime (1963), he set out the themes, characters, and situations that have dominated his subsequent work. Everywhere, time is out of joint. The seams between past and present, reality and might-have-been, momentarily buckle and tear. "I'm Scared" catalogues a dozen examples—a radio that picks up transmissions of thirty years ago, a woman who chases away a dog two years before it was born, a man who finds a photograph showing how he'll look in the future, a pedestrian who steps off a curb in 1876 and is killed in the street eighty years later, etc. In "The Third Level," the title story of the first collection, a traveler finds a nonexistent Third Level at Grand Central Station where you can take a train back in time to the year 1894.

Perhaps, it is suggested, the past is reluctant to die, as in the eponymous story in I Love Galesburg in the Springtime, wherein turn-of-the-century streetcars clang through the modern-day streets and ancient firetrucks answer the alarm bell. "It's resisting us," says a local citizen, "for the past isn't so easily destroyed." Or, alternately, perhaps our growing dissatisfaction with the present somehow is opening the gateways to the past, as in "Such Interesting Neighbors," when the new neighbors next door are revealed to be travelers from the future, refugees from their own present escaping a terrible cataclysm. "For the first time in man's history, man is desperate to escape the present," concludes one of the characters. "Yes, there is a craving in the world like a thirst, a terrible mass pressure that you can almost feel, of millions of minds struggling against the barriers of time. I am utterly convinced that this terrible mass pressure of millions of minds is already, slight but definitely, affecting time itself."

All the erstwhile time traveller needs for his trip is the proper set of circumstances and the right psychological preparations. In two stories, "Where the Cluets Are" and "Second Chance"—both rehearsals for the novels Time and Again and From Time to Time—characters reconstruct certain physical aspects of the past so accurately (respectively, a late 19th century Victorian home and a 1923 Jordan Playboy automobile) that they become vehicles into those time periods. "I wonder if we aren't barred from the past by a thousand invisible chains," speculates the car restorer in the latter story, anticipating the words of Dr. Danziger:

You can't drive into the past in a 1957 Buick because there are no 1957 Buicks in 1923. . . . You couldn't even, I'm certain, drive with a pack of modern filter-tip cigarettes in your pocket—into a night when no such
thing existed. Or with so much as a coin bearing a modern date... All those things, small and large, are chains keeping you out of a time when they could not exist.

Two Time-Travel Classics

After expanding these themes in *The Woodrow Wilson Dime* (1963), a novel derived from his short story, “The Coin Collector,” Finney was ready for his magnum opus, *Time and Again*. Ecstatic reviews greeted its appearance. “A blend of science fiction, nostalgia, mystery and acid commentary,” said *The New York Times*; and the *San Francisco Examiner* described it as a “mind-boggling, imagination-stretching” entertainment. Its influence was immediate. Within three years Richard Matheson’s *Bid Time Return* appeared (later filmed under the title *Somewhere in Time*), another modern classic of time travel—but one that owed a great debt to Finney.

In case you aren’t one of the millions who have read it, *Time and Again* is about a young advertising illustrator, Simon Morley, who is recruited into a super-secret government Project experimenting with time travel. The Project’s founder, Dr. Danziger, and its director, Ruben Prien, have worked out the theory that there is a way to break free of the continuity of time that irrevocably bears us along from the ongoing present into the future:

> You are surrounded by literally countless facts that bind you to this century. . . like ten billion invisible threads....the list is endless, all of it a part of your own consciousness and of the common consciousness. And it binds you as it binds us all to the day and to the very moment when precisely that list and only that list is possible.

It is possible to break those bonds through a combination of circumstances: by finding a “gateway,” or environment that existed in the past and which still exists unchanged; by living in that place as if a part of the past; and by practicing self-hypnosis to remove any sense of the present from the mind.

Si Morley’s chosen destination is a time and place about which he has a particular interest, New York City in 1882. After finding an appropriate “gateway” at the old Dakota Hotel and after thoroughly immersing himself in the facts and minutiae of the period, he actually manages through hypnotic techniques to break away from the present and go back into the preceeding century. There he meets the woman of his dreams, Julia, and is drawn into an intrigue that culminates in the famous fire which consumed the World Building on January 31, 1882. Moreover, against the express wishes of Dr. Danziger, who has strictly forbidden any tampering with past events, Si determines to remain in the past. By contriving to prevent the first meeting between Danziger’s parents—an incident he has tracked down to its precise time and place—he insures that there will be no marriage, that Dr. Danziger will never be born and, as a result, that there never could be a Project in the first place. Morley can remain in the past, safely out of reach of any more time travellers.

Thus, when Finney’s sequel, *From Time to Time*, published twenty-five years later, opens, there is no Project and no Dr. Danziger. Ruben Prien exists, however, and he’s been troubled lately by disturbing dreams and visions, trace-images of people and events that might have existed in some other time track. He meets other people who are likewise distracted; collectively, they remember that yes, they might once have worked at something called a Project headed by somebody who might have been named Dr. Danziger. And they even conjure up a sense that someone named Simon Morley could have gone back into the past and
changed things so that the Project would cease to exist. It’s as if an alternate time track still exists for them and is now seeping through cracks in the wall that separate it from their own present.

Ruben and his friends decide there is only way to re-establish the Project. They must send a man back in time to stop Simon Morley from preventing the meeting of Dr. Danziger’s parents.

Meanwhile, Morley, who has been living happily in the past with a wife, child, and a good job, is uneasy. Unaware that the “fluke accident” that has deflected him from preventing the meeting of Danziger’s parents was stage-managed from the future, he nonetheless realizes that now that Danziger is to be born the Project necessarily will exist in the next century. Apprehensive about these implications, Morely travels forward in time to find out what the Project is up to. Which is precisely what Ruben had hoped would happen. Ruben, in the meantime, has overthrown Danziger and taken charge, able at last to use the Project to alter events in the past. His scheme, with Morley’s help, is nothing less than the prevention of World War One. “The twentieth century should have been the best,” he tells Si, “—the happiest, the human race ever knew. We were on our way in those first early years! And then the great change occurred. Something sent us down another path. Into a war nobody needed. What we can do, Si, would not be a change but a restoration to the path the world was already on.”

Si is reluctant at first, but when Ruben shows him documents testifying to the fact that Si’s son will be killed in that war, he accedes. Before Si is through, his mission will involve a trip backward to 1912, plenty of foreign intrigue, a dizzying flight in an aeroplane over Manhattan, and a desperate attempt to avert the Titanic disaster.

To those readers unacquainted with Finney, a warning concerning Time and Again and From Time to Time is in order. Although he is indisputably one of the great storytellers of all time, he has a tendency to stop his plotlines dead in their tracks while he takes a long look around and drinks in the details of the scene. Sure enough, in From Time to Time Finney chooses to delay Si’s climactic rendezvous with the Titanic for a considerable period. For long intervals the narrative remains suspended while, for page after page, Simon’s “extravagant gaze” (of which the poet Novalis spoke) embraces the New York of 1912, a city whose shining clarity is for him like a vision of Eden. When he first views the city at twilight, he salutes the poignancy of the moment:

But now in this beginning
Manhattan evening I could feel it powerfully present, a lovely lonely joy with a promise possible only just here and just now and in the moments to follow, all around and close by, just ahead somewhere if I would simply rise and walk through the cooling blue dusk out into it.

The next morning, a stranger to the crowds of the Manhattan streets, he sees everything, while the sightseers and passersby, who live and work there, see nothing. He ambles down Fifth Avenue, cataloguing every detail of architecture and clothing. He visits a lecture-demonstration of ragtime dancing at Delmonico’s, flies dizzily above Manhattan in a new-fangled “hydro-aeroplane,” sits entranced before the rising red-plush curtain of a Broadway play, and, best of all, spends a night at a theatrical boarding house “somewhere in the thirties” listening to tales of vaudeville life from a grizzled old veteran of 23 years of age. (Times can be so tough, the man says, that “we slept all day to forget we ought to eat.”)
This monologue, entirely irrelevant to the main story, is nonetheless an extraordinary tour-de-force, a superb blend of Finney’s abilities as a careful scholar and observer.

Gradually, each surface and gesture of the scene stands out from its surroundings, limned in a peculiar edge-light of its own. A cable car approaches out of the darkness. Si notes:

I stood watching the car’s round electric eye flitter its light along the uneven brick pavement ahead….This wonderful open streetcar trundled past me now, the moving rectangle of light beside it sliding along, reaching over the curb, to momentarily brush a wavering polish onto the rounded tips of my shoes.

He compares the knife-edge of the Flatiron Building, situated between Broadway and Fifth Avenue, to the prow of a ship “looking ready to sail” up either street; the funnels of the Mauretania ocean liner look like “enormous white saxophones”; and he reminds us that the Great White Way in 1912 really was white—”no neon, every automobile and streetcar headlight, every street-level shop window and theater marquee blazingly lighted by clear, spike-ended white bulbs.”

Meanwhile, readers impatient for the Big Finish on the Titanic are tearing their hair out.

Do not think that throughout the book Finney is merely indulging in fuzzy nostalgia or wish-fulfillment escapist fantasies. He has always acknowledged that problems existed in the 19th century as they do everywhere—or everytime—else. Anyone who has researched this period as thoroughly as he has would readily admit that. (See his essays in his non-fiction book, Forgotten News, for ample evidence.) But can you blame him if he also applauds the vanished style, elegance, and enthusiasm of the age—as opposed to the dulling and destructive agencies of today’s nuclear devastation, global pollution, and chemical warfare?

Finney’s chosen modes of time travel might test the credulity of certain readers. The Project’s techniques of self-hypnosis and historical reconstruction pale in comparison to the bizarre gizmos and complicated physics we’ve seen in twenty-five years of Back to the Future movies, television series like Time Tunnel and Quantum Leap, and recent films like Timecop. Even the paradoxes Finney raises—the jumbling of time tracks and the plethora of alternate realities—seem tame by comparison with the mind-bending dilemmas of such masters in the field as A. E. Van Vogt (Twists in Time), Poul Anderson (the Time Patrol series), and Robert A. Heinlein (whose By His Bootstraps is, in my opinion, the ultimate time-travel paradox story).

The truth is, since the publication of Time and Again twenty-five years ago, collisions of past, present, and future no longer dazzle us. A quick surf across the television channels is a quixotic journey through fractured time and space: Soldiers in World War I race toward the mushroom cloud of Hiroshima; Keystone Kops throw pies at the N.Y.P.D.; Carl Sandburg reads poetry on the Home Shopping Network; and Humphrey Bogart sells softdrinks. In a few moments of time-lapse film, a folded flower suddenly bursts into bloom. In an endless instant of high-speed photography a speeding bullet hangs motionless in the air. And nothing happens just once anymore—slam dunks, Presidential assassinations, the Challenger disaster are replayed again and again—fast-forward, fast-reverse, slow motion, accelerated motion, freeze-frame. They are moments stuck in time, pasted like stamps into a collector’s book.

Admittedly, had Finney depended
exclusively on such special effects, and had he pretzled *Time and Again* and *From Time to Time* into the byzantine tangles of time-travel paradoxes, they might have been of no particular consequence. Happily, he has done nothing of the kind. For him, time travel is not a special-effects gimmick but a metaphor seeing the world with renewed wonder. It provides the leverage by which we can step out of our routine and see familiar things as if for the first time. “Every man remembers the thing that struck him like the thunderbolt of an instant,” said G.K. Chesterton, “though it had stood there waiting for him as the memorial of an aeon.” Moreover, it’s a way to consider the world for what it might have been and what it yet could be. It accepts no truth or experience or action as fixed and immutable. It gazes past them into the boundless world of possibilities.

**Finney’s Legacy**

There is no underestimating the influence these stories have had on modern fantasy literature in general. Finney, along with Ray Bradbury, Charles Beaumont, John Collier, Henry Kuttner, Shirley Jackson, and Richard Matheson, created modern fables that were neither pure science fiction nor traditional horror. They replaced the gothic settings and grotesque monsters of the Lovecraft and M.R. James schools with contemporary settings and recognizable situations that transcended the limited audiences of the pulps and appealed to the mainstream readers of magazines like *Colliers*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Playboy*. Writing in *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King justly contends that it was Finney, perhaps more than anyone—particularly in the “benchmark collection” *The Third Level*—who truly forged the modern fantasy vein popularized for all time in Rod Serling’s *The Twilight Zone*. Yet, ironically, while some of Finney’s work showed up on the lesser-known television series *Science Fiction Theater*, none appeared on the *Zone*. “I urge you to find a copy of Finney’s *The Third Level*,” wrote King, “which will show you what *The Twilight Zone* could have been.”

Finally, when I dip back into the pages of Finney’s books, as I do on occasion, and revisit the stories I first read so long ago, strange things happen. Characters don’t move and talk precisely the way I had remembered; events don’t transpire in just the way I had supposed. Blinking, I double-check the lines of print. No, that can’t be….At the same time I have the vague premonition that the next time I scan them, the stories will seem changed again…and again. Similarly, the next time I read *From Time to Time* the fate of the *Titanic* might be—well; never mind. That’s all right. I’m content. Jack Finney’s work, I am convinced, is for all our times, not just for this one. That’s his secret: He tests the flux of time and tide against the ticking of our own pulses.

  —John C. Tibbetts