

I began *In Over Her Head* as the smoke settled from the collapse of the Trade Towers across the water from Brooklyn where I was living, and an age of fear and suspicion dawned over us all. The focus of the book is art as a healer, destroyer, and its use by manipulators to positive or negative outcome, regardless of the cost to the artist. Growing up among the highest ranks of the art world in the entourage of Salvador Dali and other world art stars, I was often shocked at the way movers and shakers wielded their power over the artists they tended and depended on, and a coming of age satire from the point of view of an ingenue thrown into their midst seemed the only way to approach the topic. In the face of things at the time, using humor as an integral element to this techno-thriller was a natural choice, and makes the book that much more enjoyable.

The debut of Penny Bell's musical composition, featuring the use of mysterious extremely low frequency waves takes a tragic turn when several concert-goers die in their seats during the performance. The once-bright horizons of Penny's career collapse, and she retreats to a dank Soho basement apartment lit only by the glow of computer monitors and electronic displays. There, using herself as a guinea pig, she sets out to unlock the secrets of her beautiful and deadly symphonies. A series of strange coincidences intrude upon her solitary quest. Her neighbor, the erotic performance artist Ula Nova disappears after her studio is broken into. And then Ula's charming and damaged young choreographer appears and sweeps Penny off to Europe to search for the diva, plunging Penny into a seedy and unfamiliar world of jet set artists and international intrigue where the threads of every encounter always seem to lead back to those ELF waves and their pint-sized progenitor.

The idea for this novel took shape after re-reading *Candide* by Voltaire shortly after 9/11. I had for quite a while wanted to write the story of a young artist and her path through the murky shallows of the International art world in a way that was both funny and dealt seriously with certain issues that young, not independently wealthy artists [there are so few of us, now!] encounter in an up to date, sci-fi, post-dot-com setting. My protagonist is intelligent, educated, but not socially sophisticated. I realized this little book, *Candide*, written over two hundred years ago [1759] could teach me a lot. *Candide* is rife with disasters, yet the main character muddles through, finds, loses and finds again love in the course of the narrative as he

experiences and witnesses firsthand the tumult of history in the making while traveling the globe.

My protagonist was raised to believe in the power of Science, just as Candide was raised to believe in the optimism that swept through the dawn of the industrial revolution -- which was the dawn of our age of science and technology, of space travel and atom bombs, and of of the American dream. This dream has become the dream of instant gratification and the reality of instant communications that open up the world to virtual banking, virtual sex, virtual real estate and virtual reality.

So, Candide's "Best of all Possible worlds" and the American dream- the 21st century virtual reality American dream are not so far from each other at all.

Penny is from the backwoods of Montana, where people are generally more trusting and on the level than in the big cities, be it Paris, Boston or New York, so by the time of her ill-fated debut concert and its aftermath, this honest but not truly naive young woman is ill prepared for the level of intrigue she encounters.

The principle plot concerns Penny Bell's music experiment gone very wrong, and its consequences. It is said that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Well, here it only takes one to catapult Penny into a mess of spoiled social misfits who are primarily interested in using her for their own twisted purposes. Cutting edge technology and its use for good or ill by the opposition characters is a recurrent theme, making this a work of speculative fiction, if not outright science fiction, but more like Maxwell Smart than James Bond, for the characters get entangled by their bungling use of technology.

The relationship between modern man and technology is countered by man's timeless search for spiritual meaning, for serenity in a mad world.

In the case of one character, Ula, both technology and spiritual traditions are used in the search for immortality, which incidentally is also a theme in Voltaire's Candide with the passages on the discovery of the mythic land called El Dorado.)

Technology takes on an even more sinister and intimate role when Penny realizes that she is under constant surveillance and has been for months in the lower Manhattan studio where she has been hiding out from the curiosity

seekers and spooks descending upon her since her experimental concert. Even after following her new friends to Paris in search of her next door neighbor, the group's disappeared star, she discovers disks of evidence with hours of surveillance video. Penny finds herself increasingly paranoid.

These feelings are complicated by the romance that evolves between her and the very person she most suspects-the man who brought her over from New York in the first place:the star's boyfriend.

I don't believe it's the writer's role to answer questions, only to ask them. Interestingly, though, the questions the characters are faced with and the decisions they make, lead to an inevitable outcome. I discovered in writing this novel that in a sense the novel writes itself, and it was amazing to discover how the relationship between cause and effect which binds our reality also holds in this world of make believe. To keep my focus, I did stick to an outline after my rough draft, and although there were a few drafts after that to keep track of the narrative, all I did then was edit, edit, and edit. At the same time I needed to avoid the bare bones story recommendations for commercial fiction. My book was not so uni-dimensional. Its pace is fast and its themes universal, but the plot is too nuanced, the characters too developed, the locations too real- most are real, and the themes too intertwined to limit myself to such narrow parameters.I listed this novel as a techno-thriller but I was not writing an airport paperback-I don't even read them! What I had been reading besides classic eighteenth century farces, were works of contemporary fiction by the likes of Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, Haruki Murakami, Walker Percy, Carlos Ruis Safon and Margaret Atwood, to name a few.

The basic theme of the novel is Art, primarily music as art, and how it impacts our perception, our emotions, even our physical well-being. Of course it can change our lives, but all art has this power, for better but also for worse, and this is the major leitmotif of the book.

First is the role of ELF's or Extremely Low Frequency waves, the band of audio frequencies from 3 to 30 Hz. Originally used in tracking submarines during WWII, many other uses have been found for them since, including experiments with them as a mind control agent and for crowd control in riots. My Protagonist, Penny Bell, after studying the sound experiments of the

ancient Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras, and of his later compatriot the contemporary composer Yannis Xenakis, writes and performs a composition for her MIT doctoral thesis using a version of these waves with the best of intentions- using music to heal and uplift. The outcome is quite the opposite and people die mysteriously in their seats. Penny must then find where she went wrong and how to undo her damage before another tragedy strikes. At the same time, she is discovered by those black operatives who think she is onto something they can use. She escapes to New York to an underground studio to continue her experiments when she is interrupted by the break-in of the studio next door of an eccentric downtown art performance diva. This character is unusually interested and well informed concerning Penny's work, yet has barely acknowledged her presence until now. The next morning she has disappeared.

A call from a foreign man introduces the next character, the Diva Ula Nova's fiance Alessandro Tivoglio, her choreographer/handler. Through him Penny discovers that her music is being used without her permission, and in breach of copyright laws. She becomes curious, not to mention furious, and decides then and there she has to get to the bottom of this. Together these two jet off on the Concorde-to Paris in search of the disappeared artist, with Penny hoping to shed light on how her dangerous music has been accessed and distributed.

The next time we meet the theme of Art impacting our senses and our emotional well being concerns not music but the visual arts, and more precisely the three dimensional arts of sculpture and architecture, and the poetry written about their effect on an audience. Penny unexpectedly encounters Ula Nova at the Louvre museum while pondering a bust of Pythagoras, that early experimenter in the effects of sound. Ula then takes Penny on a tour of this vast museum she knows so well until they come before the pair of Michelangelo slave statues at the end of the great hall of renaissance sculpture.

Before Michelangelo's monumental marble of a dying slave-a very erotic figure of a swooning nude athlete, Ula confronts Penny with a poem by Rilke on the terrible nature of angels and introduces her to the famous malaise diagnosed by the French nineteenth century novelist Stendhal. This legendary illness, dubbed the Stendhal effect or syndrome, has such symptoms as rapid

heartbeat, confusion, dizziness, hallucinations and even loss of consciousness when an individual is exposed to excessive amounts of profound art: paintings, sculpture or architecture.

The two go on to discuss the differences between Beauty in art and Beauty in the Flesh while standing below the magnificent Michelangelo, that, coincidentally or not, is in appearance, if not in substance or scale, the marble twin of Ula's choreographer/fiance. 107-108

Ula recites in a dreamy voice:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?

and even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart,

I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence,

for Beauty's nothing but the beginning of Terror we're just able to bear,

and why we adore it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us."

Repeatedly throughout the novel we are confronted with the question what is real? More real than real. Can virtual reality have as deep an effect as a person or a work of art in the flesh? Is it possible to love a virtual being? Can a human being become a work of art and how would that make them immortal? Can a human being input so much of themselves into a work of art-virtual art that they become immortal? Penny tries in vain to consider Ula's argument, coming down with much more than a case of Stendhal syndrome.

This brings us to the flip side of the art theme, that of technology. Technology as an intrusive force in our lives, as an immeasurably helpful one, but also as a force that can blur our understanding of what is real, what is right, what is worthwhile. Also, technology in many ways has swallowed up art, and is attempting to swallow up many other parts of our lives.

ELF Waves These sparked my imagination into overdrive after years of

joking with my composer spouse about the psychological effects of certain musics.

This particular article is most likely total pseudo-science, but illustrates the gist of what is going on with Penny's experiment. Her aim is to heal inducing peace and joy. The article describes the various reactions to different ELF waves:

"Their behavior followed the changes anticipated at very precise frequencies. Waves below 6 cycles per second caused the subjects to become very emotionally upset, and even disrupted bodily functions. At 8.2 cycles, they felt very high ... an elevated feeling, as though they had been in masterful meditation, learned over a period of years." That however is not what happened to Penny's audience "11.3 cycles induced waves of depressed agitation leading to riotous behavior."

In contrast to Penny' technological approach to healing we have that of her new associates, Sandro, a devout catholic, who believes in divine intervention, and Ula, who has a misguided understanding of eastern mystical practices and mixes them up with Hi-tech theories of transcendence and longevity,(such as those of electronics wizard and noted futurist Ray Kurzweil who believes that we will soon be able to download our personalities into non-biological systems that would render us effectively immortal-- although presently he is popping lots of vitamin pills to keep his 60 year old biological system in top notch condition until these machines are available.)

Contact with these ideas gets Penny thinking and experimenting with new solutions to her problem.

A major theme, of course is the take on a little girl trapped in a world of debauchery. Penny is not a child, but her worldly new friends consider her one, and they have plans for her and her genius, starting with Ula, the performance artist/virtual reality erotic dancer, who wants a lot more from Penny than the secrets of her music. She wants to absorb Penny's youth in her quest for immortality, and steal her fresh unspoiled sex appeal to recharge her own jaded and exhausted sexuality.

Behind both Sandro and Ula is the ever present force of Ula's guardian, Dick

Schwanz, a celebrity painter and off color personality with a finger in every unsavory pot in town. Dick Schwanz has made his fortune painting with his own bodily excreta, but his prurient other interests have endangered his comfortable existence, and he now finds himself and members of his entourage in quite a bind.

Getting back to the story, Sandro and Ula's best friends Max and Mia Mueller, a brother and sister duo with plans of pop music stardom have done their best to help out, but to no avail, and after Sandro is assaulted by Ula's VR co-star- producer at the Mueller's rooftop spread, the group takes refuge at Sandro's estranged mother's house.

Beatrice Tivoglio pronounced (Bay-ah-tree-chay) B actress in Italian--is a faded top model and actress in trashy spaghetti westerns and as a mother she is also of questionable merit. The incestuous relationship between all of these characters becomes ever more apparent, and as they are thrown together all chaos breaks loose.

A quick holiday in Rome meant to mend frayed feelings shreds them further. After a traumatic visit to the spot where Sandro's brother Angelino's ashes were strewn into the Tiber and after Ula's jealous tantrum before the "Boca della Verita"(the ancient Roman oracle stone that reveals a lie by swallowing the hand inserted into its mouth,) we wonder where it will all end.

Penny has already found that she has mysteriously been given mind altering drugs, is being stalked, both in real life and in cyber-space, and now she finds she is in jeopardy of losing not only her career, her grant, and her sanity but her new lover as well.

She returns to her basement in New York a shattered human being. It is from here that she begins to see that all these seemingly unrelated disasters can be traced back to one source. But is she getting to bottom of it on her own or is she being reeled in?

Convinced that she has been abandoned by everyone, her new friends as well as whatever family she had back in Montana, she finds comfort in her work, and in spiritual practices she has been introduced to or re-introduced to through her friends. A small painting of an innocent but infinitely wise Madonna, a parting gift from her lover Sandro, hangs on her concrete wall watching over her as she re-works her masterpiece of music.

She repeats as a mantra a poem by the Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila, that the devout catholic Sandro recited to her:

Nada te turbe. Nada te espante. Todo se pasa. Dios no se muda. La paciencia  
Todo lo alcanza. Quien a Dios tiene Nada le falta. Sólo Dios basta.

Nothing can trouble you. Nothing can scare you. Everything changes. God  
alone remains unchanged. Patience brings everything. He who holds god  
wants nothing. God alone suffices.

Wary of institutionalized anything, Penny never-the-less sees the the almost  
zen- Buddhist wisdom in this and carries those words, along with the image  
of the painting, in her mind as she finds herself on her most perilous journey  
yet.

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