

“Action, adventure, cool speculative events, well-drawn characters, and an ending that sticks the landing: *Fata Morgana* pushes all my happy buttons.”

—JOHN SCALZI, AUTHOR OF *OLD MAN'S WAR*

FATA MORGANA



SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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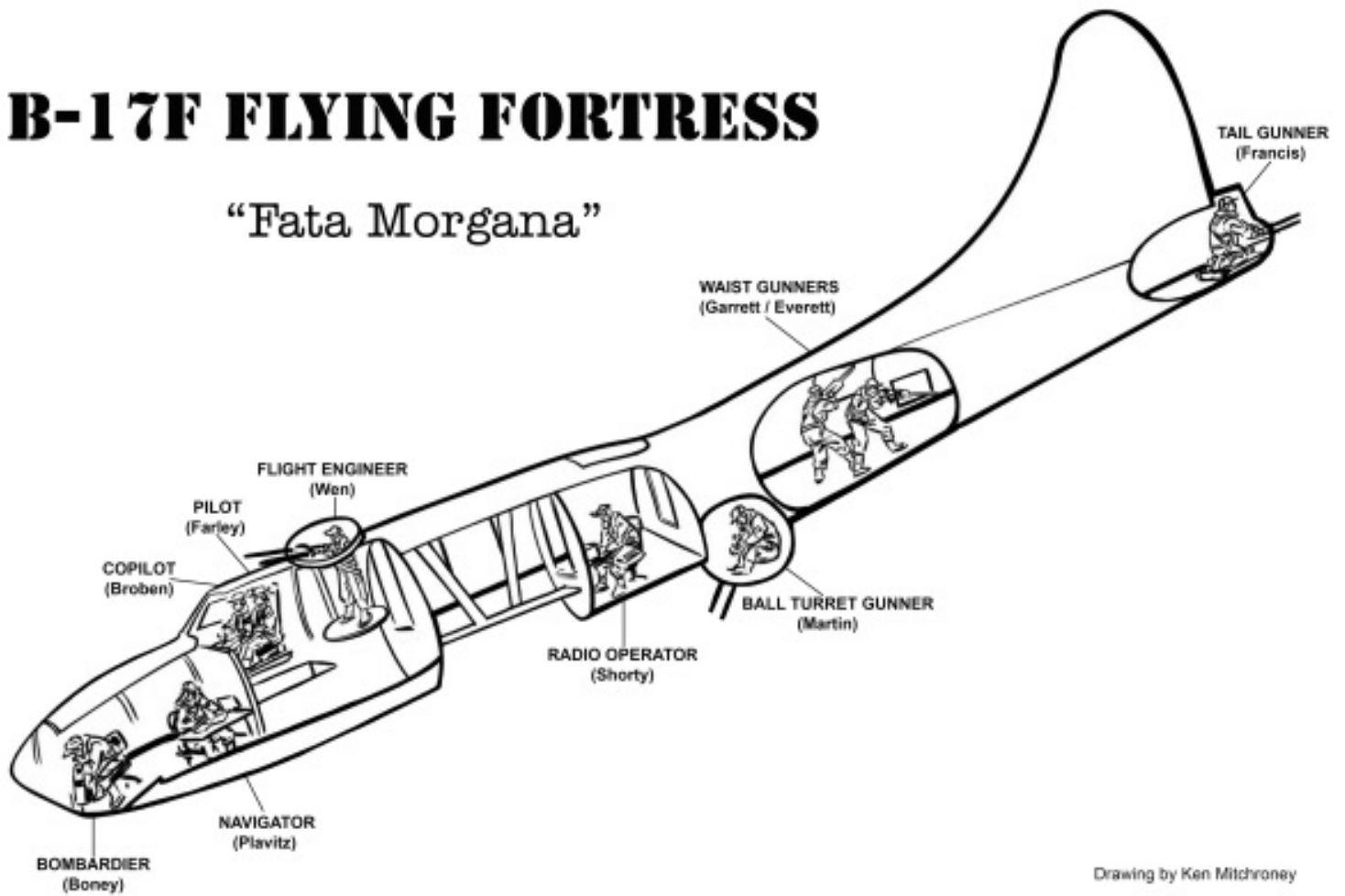
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fata morgana, *noun*: an unusual form of mirage involving almost any kind of distant object, often distorted unrecognizably, and visible from land or sea, polar regions or deserts, at any altitude, including from airplanes. The name (from the sorceress Morgan le Fay in the Arthurian legend) derives from a belief that these mirages were fairy castles in the air or false land created by witchcraft to lure sailors to their death.

B-17F FLYING FORTRESS

“Fata Morgana”



Drawing by Ken Mitchrone

prologue

Two weeks ago in the *Voice of America* they had bombed an airplane factory in Brunswick and barely made it back. The Germans had that ground sewn up tight, flak so heavy the birds were walking on it. Even while you watched it shred the bombers in triple-group formation ahead of you, you found yourself admiring the precision placement. The krauts had a gee-whiz mechanical computer rangefinder that directed the 8.8-centimeter antiaircraft guns that fired a twenty-pound shell faster than the speed of sound. The shells went off at programmed altitudes like deadly popcorn kernels, spraying metal fragments that punched through aluminum sheeting, cut fuel and electrical and hydraulic lines, fouled props, and shredded engines and men.

And there was nothing to be done about it. The bombers had to stay level and on-course because the top-secret Norden bombsight had delicate gyros that wanted a Cadillac glide once the run over the Initial Point began. For maximum concentration of explosive damage, the bombers had to remain in tight echelon formation—which also maximized the devastation of the flak bursts. Once the bomb run began there was no deviating. No evasive maneuvers, no flying above or below the flak level. There was nothing you could do but ride it out and grab your lucky charms. The only good in that hot mess was that the flak kept the Luftwaffe out of their hair, because on the Brunswick mission the Messerschmitts had been on them like starving fleas on a fat hound.

Boney Mullen, their bombardier, had released with the lead bombardier's drop over the target, and they were just banking off the run to dive below the flak when they caught a close burst low on the right side. It took out Number Three engine and punched through the ball turret and shot chunks into the fuselage.

Voice of America was a hangar queen. She'd thrown a rod on the mission before this one,

and Wen Bonniker, their flight engineer, had asked Farley if he could requisition a junked B-17 for parts. “Then we could fly that one instead,” he’d drawled, straight-faced. “Cause fixing this one’s like taking a gator to the vet. You’re just making it better so it can try to kill you again.”

Captain Farley had feathered Number Three after it got creamed. Then he saw that it was leaking oil. At least the goddamn thing wasn’t on fire. In the copilot seat beside him Lieutenant Broben called out the oil-pressure drop and reported that fuel was looking okay. He shut off Number Three fuel line and Farley upped throttle on the remaining engines. Higher RPM would eat up fuel, and the drag on Number Three would eat up more. It was a long way back to England, and now the bomber would be trying to turn right the entire way. TDB, too damn bad.

Farley got on the interphone for a status check. The crew reported that the bird was holier than the pope, but Number Three engine seemed to have got the worst of the damage. Handsome Hansen hadn’t reported back from the ball turret and Farley told Garrett to go check on him. Garrett banged a wrench on the turret hatch and didn’t get a return bang, so he cranked the turret and undogged the latches and swung the hatch down and stared into the tiny space for a moment. Then he dogged the hatch again and reported that the ball turret was out of commission and that Hansen had been killed by flak. He did not report the jagged, foot-wide hole in the side of the turret, or the bloody chunks of Hansen coating the inside in a kind of frozen stew that was in no way identifiable as something that, ten minutes earlier, had been a nineteen-year-old with big white teeth and a total inability to tell when his leg was being pulled.

With an engine out the *Voice of America* couldn’t keep up with the flight group, so Farley had dropped out of the formation. He and Broben watched the other bombers pull ahead, stark silhouettes in the midday sun. They counted four B-17s missing from the group, apart from the *Voice*. Two of the remaining bombers were burning oil or worse, and trailed dark black plumes that would be a roadmap for any Luftwaffe pilots who sighted them.

Broben had shaken his head in disgust and said, “Why don’t we skywrite directions to the airfield while we’re at it?”

Farley nodded grimly and gave the homebound formation a wistful two-fingered salute. Then he told the crew to keep a sharp eye out for enemy fighters. Straggling alone apart from the bomber group the *Voice* was now a flying bullseye. The German pilots would go after her like wolves after a stray yearling. There’d be no help from other bombers, and the *Voice* was still hours away from picking up a fighter escort.

Near the coast north of Rotterdam they were spotted by four Bf 109s. Farley had taken the B-17 down below ten thousand so that the denser air would give the fuel more stretch and

the crew could take off their oxygen masks. The yellow-nosed Messerschmitts broke formation and came at them from high and behind, four o'clock and eight o'clock. The *Voice* filled with staccato hammering from the .50-caliber Browning machine guns at the waist and tail and upper turret. The German fighters were going for the damaged wing. Oil had sprayed everywhere, and one good tracer round would light her up like a fuse leading straight to the fuel cells. Instant Fourth of July.

But Everett scored a hit on the Messerschmitts' first pass, firing from the bomber's right waist and carving chunks out of the canopy of the lead fighter. The Bf 109 veered off and corkscrewed down into the pale green Dutch countryside.

The other three fighters had immediately broken off the attack. That shot of Everett's had been the lucky first-round haymaker that ends the fight right then and there, and the remaining Luftwaffe pilots seemed only too happy to turn tail. Maybe it was dinner time.

Garrett and Everett usually went at each other like an old married couple, but when the 109s broke off, Garrett—a heavyweight wrestler in high school a few years ago—picked Everett up in a bear hug and carried him to the back of the bomber, laughing and yelling and calling him one terrific son of a bitch.

It had been great shooting, all right, but everyone knew how lucky they'd all been. There could easily have been forty fighters instead of four. And if the 109s had come from below, their pilots would have seen the wrecked ball turret and started working on gutting the bottom-blind *Voice of America* like a trout.

After the Messerschmitts had sped off, Farley took the *Voice* down to two thousand feet to conserve even more fuel. Number Four was leaking now and oil pressure was dropping. Wen reported that he could smell fuel near the bomb bay.

The North Sea was whitecapped and rough two thousand feet below. Farley didn't think the junkheap bomber was going to make it across. And he sure as hell didn't like the idea of his crew bobbing like corks in that cold rough water for however long it would take the Allies or the Germans to pick them up—assuming anyone picked them up at all. Turning back to bail out over Holland and Belgium was out, unless they wanted to ride out the war in a *stalag*. If they weren't shot after parachuting in.

Farley gave Plavitz their fuel situation and told him to find an English runway in range. The navigator stopped his constant drummer's paradiddles and hunkered over his charts and did calculations with pencil and paper and worked a ruler and compass on a chart and said he thought they could make the joint RAF/USAAF base at Horsham St. Faith outside Norwich. If not, there were RAF bases along the route—but they were all medium-bomber fields, and Plavitz wasn't sure about the runways. Farley told him beggars can't be choosers, and Plavitz sang out coordinates for the nearest field.

The bum-engined bomber took some nursing. They were losing altitude and speed and Farley couldn't get her to climb. Any slower than this and raising the nose would stall her. Farley told the crew they could either bail into the North Atlantic or take their chances on reaching an airfield.

There hadn't even been a pause. "*We're with you, cap,*" said Wen. The others chimed their agreement.

"All right, then," Farley told the crew, "let's clean her out. Everything that isn't nailed down goes out the window. We don't have room to be sentimental here."

"*Sentimental, my ass,*" came Wen's gravel voice. "*I want to jack her up and slide a whole new bomber under her.*" You weren't supposed to bad-mouth your aircraft, but Wen had pretty much given up by now.

The *Voice of America* had begun raining guns and gear into the North Sea. Brownings, ammo, parachutes, oxygen tanks, flak suits, helmets, binoculars. Boney wanted to activate the thermite grenade on the Norden bombsight, but Wen convinced him that no German was going to snag the thing on a fish hook before the war was over. Fuel was leaking everywhere and Wen was afraid that setting off the Norden would blow the whole damn aircraft. Boney acquiesced and then heaved the heavy apparatus out the front access hatch. Plavitz sadly patted his sextant and then chucked it out, followed by his entire chart table. He also quietly slipped his drumsticks into his flight suit. None of the other crew would have missed them, but Plavitz would rather go into the drink himself than chuck the pair of sticks he'd been beating since he was old enough to hold them.

Thirty minutes later the bomber was a hundred feet off the water and the English coast was dead ahead. Farley had the throttle shoved forward and his arms were aching from wrestling the control wheel.

"I'm open to suggestions," he told Broben.

"Set her down on the beach," his copilot offered. "I can work on my tan."

"In England?"

"It's still a beach."

Farley told the crew he was going to leave the wheels up and try to set her down in the shallows. He ordered them to throw out their heavy flak jackets and be sure they were wearing their mae wests, then take crash positions, which really just meant getting on the floor with a cushion and bracing themselves.

Number Four burped and cut out as Farley was banking left to line up the bomber over a stretch of narrow beach. He put all his weight into turning the control wheel, and he feathered Number Four and told Jerry to cut power to the remaining two engines. Jerry quickly powered down the engines and generators and shut off the fuel lines, and the *Voice*

of America went silent for her last ten seconds of flight.

The North Sea blurred by on the left and England streaked by on the right. Farley kept the nose up and felt the tail touch water. The drag brought the nose down and Farley quickly raised the flaps to help her skim along the surface. They planed along the shallows off the beach like a skipping stone. The bomber breached the chop. The crew were jolted, then slammed forward as the fuselage touched bottom and hissed along the sand. Then the left wing's leading edge bit water hard and they were thrown around as the bomber slewed left.

The aircraft ground to a halt and yawed to port. Cold seawater poured through the wheelwells and bomb bay doors. The crew scrambled to their feet and got the hell out, each man picturing himself trapped in a huge metal coffin sliding to the bottom of a freezing sea. But the *Voice of America* had landed in shallow water, and her right half lay fully on the narrow beach as if her captain had ordered her careened.

Farley grabbed the flare gun, and he and Broben helped each other out the window. They slid down the hull and splashed into the cold water and slogged to the raw beach. Farley counted heads while Broben lit a Lucky and stood looking at the Flying Fortress half-submerged in the breaking shallows.

“Keep sailing like that and you’ll make admiral someday, Joseph,” he said.

Farley had scowled at the beached bomber. Waves gurgled against the hull. The water around her stained with leaking oil and fuel. He looked at Wen. “Think they can fix her?” he asked.

Wen spat. “I’m worried they might. She was a dog, I’d shot her five missions ago,” he said.

Farley nodded. Then he handed Wen the flare gun. “Here,” he said. “Put her out of our misery.”

The RAF had picked them up. The Limeys in their fatigues regarding the huge American bomber burning on their shore.

At Horsham St. Faith they were debriefed about the Brunswick mission and then billeted in the most comfortably appointed barracks any of them had seen since joining up. Next morning they hitched a ride with a USAAF supply convoy back to Thurgood, where they found that their billets had been given over to new arrivals and their belongings had been divided up among the squadron, except for personal effects, which had been given to the chaplain to be mailed back home.

No one at Thurgood could believe it when the nine remaining *Voice of America* crewmen hopped off the Jimmy Deuce outside the mess tent. That night the crew were stood warm beers in the Boiler Room, and no one else realized the survivors were toasting the loss of the *Voice of America* every bit as much as they were celebrating having made it back alive. They

left a glass full for Hansen and nobody mentioned him.

Every man got back every item that had been parceled out, except for the food that had been eaten. Zippos, paperbacks, playing cards, clothes. Francis, their tail gunner, even got back his *Shadow* comic books.

part one: the mission

one

Shorty perched on the A-frame ladder with six colors of paint in half-cut beer cans jostling on the top step as he worked the brush against the riveted aircraft hull. It was late afternoon on a rare sunny day in Thurgood, but the olive-painted aluminum was still cool and taking the paint well. The long fuselage of the B-17F Flying Fortress slanted down to Shorty's right, shadow stretching onto the recently constructed concrete taxiway. The Number Two engine propeller was a huge Y behind him.

“Her tits are too small.”

Shorty looked down to see Gus Garrett squinting up at him. Blue eyes in a work-tanned face, hair the color of cornsilk. A worn ball glove hung on his left hand.

“Too small for what?” Shorty asked.

Garrett grinned. “For me, for starters.”

Shorty shook his head sadly. “You just remember them bigger,” he said in Jack Benny's instantly recognizable voice. “Because you haven't seen any in so long, y'know.”

“I wanted 'em bigger then, too,” said Garrett, and turned back to the game of catch going on around the bomber parked on its hardstand.

Shorty shook his head and went back to work painting the nose art. He'd already drawn the shape in chalk and then painted in the face, the flesh tones, the blue leotard, the gauzy windblown cape. Flesh tones were hard, but at least he was working with oils, thanks to Corporal Brinkman's run into town for more art supplies.

Sunny days in June seemed about as common as rocking-horse shit here in southeastern England. Shorty was squeezing everything he could out of it, but soon he'd be losing the sunlight, and he still had to do the black ink outlines and final highlights that would make the whole thing pop and give it life.

Below him someone cleared his throat and spat. Shorty looked down to see Flight Engineer Wendell Bonniker squinting up at the painting in progress. Wen was a beefy, sandy-haired guy who was always looking at things as if he were trying to figure out how to fix them. People included. Four years ago he'd quit high school to run moonshine outside of Charlotte, and he'd outrun feds and sheriffs on endless miles of winding country road in cars he'd built and modified and repaired since he'd been old enough to reach the pedals. Wen claimed he could drive or fix anything with wheels on it, and given the magic he worked on a ship, no one had any reason to doubt him.

"That farmboy gettin' in your hair?" Wen called up.

Shorty wiped his forehead with the arm holding the brush. "Says her tits are too small."

"Sheeit," said Wen. He raised his voice. "That tractor jockey never saw tits on nothing he didn't have to milk at five a.m."

Shorty grinned and turned back to his painting.

"Legs could be longer, though," Wen added.

Shorty sagged. "For crying in the sink," he said. He glared over his shoulder and shook the brush at Wen. In Jack Benny's voice he said, "Don't you have a ball to throw, Cinderella?"

Wen smirked. "Man, you arty types sure are touchy." He touched the bill of his worn A-3 cap and spat tobacco juice and went to rejoin the game of catch.

The crew liked to go out to the bomber and throw the ball around after chow. It let them blow off steam and bitch about the Army and insult each other without it getting too personal. It worked pretty well.

Today they had another reason for their ritual game of catch. The B-17F heavy bomber that Shorty was painting was brand-new, delivered the day before yesterday and parked on a hardstand in the slot the much-reviled Voice of America had occupied for half a dozen straight missions.

At the moment the new bird was just a number, unchristened and untested. And even though her delivery had also been her shakedown cruise and she'd been checked out on arrival—and would be gone over again by the ground crew if Ordnance got the go-ahead tonight—Wen had told Captain Farley that a little tire-kicking session might be a good idea.

Farley had agreed. This was one of the world's most complicated machines, about to be loaded with four tons of coiled death and thrown into the sky with ten young men who squabbled like close brothers even though they had been strangers to each other the year before, and schoolboys the year before that. A successful mission and those ten lives could turn on a tightened oil gasket, a correctly loaded ammo belt, or any of the ten thousand other things that could go graveyard wrong. When that huge and intricate web could be undone at

almost any strand, you bought yourself whatever insurance you could.

So today's game of catch served as a smoke screen to let the crew check out the ground crew's work without looking as if they didn't trust the ground crew. Because you had to trust the ground crew. The alternative was to worry that one link in that chain had not been done right, and go completely out of your mind. And the crew couldn't afford that, because doing their own jobs right could drive them foxhole crazy if they thought too much about what they were doing. USAAF hospitals were full to bursting with promising young men who had looked too long and too hard into the wholesale abattoir that was the new science of aerial warfare. Human brains might have invented it, but they sure as hell weren't built to endure it. As Lieutenant Broben put it, going daffy was the only reasonable thing a man could do in these conditions.

Somewhere behind Shorty a ball clapped into a leather glove and someone shouted a friendly insult. Shorty could listen to it all day. It sounded like home.

Every so often one of the men would take off his ball glove and jump up into the main hatch of the bomber. Sometimes the crew heard banging from inside. Sometimes swearing. They ignored both. They played catch and smoked cigarettes. Or, in Boney Mullen's case, a pipe. A few minutes later the missing crewman would hop back down to the concrete and put his glove back on and quietly rejoin the game, and the ball would come his way and he'd give a little nod.

At one point Shorty heard Plavitz yelling up at him, and he patiently finished painting a section and turned around to see the navigator shaking a finger up at him. "What are you doing with my sticks?" he demanded.

"Simmer down, Gene Krupa," Shorty said. "I saw them laying around and I knew you'd blow a gasket if they turned up missing, so I grabbed them. Here." He drew Plavitz's hickory drumsticks from a rear pocket and tossed them down.

Plavitz caught them up and twirled them in the same fluid motion. "I never," he said.

"You're welcome, I'm sure," Shorty said in Bugs Bunny's voice, and turned back to the painting taking shape before him.

"Yeah, okay, thanks," said Plavitz, and disappeared into the bomber. A moment later rapid-fire rolls and lazy paradiddles sounded from different parts of the aircraft.

Shorty mixed paints onto a page torn from an old Yank magazine and leaned back to study the figure he was forming on the metal. He dipped his brush in a sheared beer can of black paint and pulled the wet bristles between his thumb and forefinger several times, testing the flow. Then he got to work on the black lines, starting with the legs, which were bare from ankle-strap high heels all the long way to the dark blue leotard at her pelvis. They were plenty long enough, thank you very much.

The drumming stopped and Plavitz hopped out of the aircraft. “It’s still got that new-bomber smell,” he announced.

Shorty made a pained face. “Your parents must be some very patient people,” he said. “Or deaf.”

Plavitz twirled a stick like a majorette. “You’ll be laughing when I’m playing with Glenn Miller,” he said, and hurried to rejoin the game of catch.

Shorty shook his head. Plavitz was okay, except when he wasn’t.

Shorty’s father, Howard Dubuque, owned a radio sales and service shop in downtown Grandville, Michigan. Little Wayne had grown up surrounded by radios and radio programs. He had learned to tell time by what show was on the air. In fifth grade he had built his first wireless radio with a piece of galena crystal and a safety pin, and he still remembered the thrill of hearing Fibber McGee’s voice come over a speaker he had salvaged from a busted radio.

As he grew older he helped his father in the shop, troubleshooting ornate Gothic Hartcos, arched Philco cathedrals, cheap Sears Bakelite Silvertones. Eventually Wayne had his own little corner in the shop’s back room. He’d repair the electronics, polish the wood with lemon oil, clean the Bakelite with dish soap. A Dubuque repair was good as new, and loyal customers and strong word of mouth helped carry Wayne’s family through the Great Depression.

When Wayne’s father asked him to spruce up the store’s faded signage, Wayne went ahead and made all-new signs. He had a knack for drawing, and soon half the stores along First Street sported Wayne’s lettering and artwork. Often he worked in trade for groceries or dry goods, one time even a month of free tickets at the Paramount.

Eventually Wayne became a ham radio operator, driving his mother crazy with the constant “CQ, CQ, this is Grandville, Michigan, USA, come in” that came from his bedroom. She would chase him out of the house, laughing and saying “Why can’t you hang out on street corners like other boys your age?”

Radio Operator was an ironclad cinch for Wayne after Basic. His knowledge and experience pretty much guaranteed a slot on a bomber roster, and flying with the new Army Air Force and all that Buck Rogers gear was the cat’s meow to the newly minted Pfc. Dubuque. After preflight training he was sent to Scott Field in Illinois for radio operator training. Wayne aced Morse Code, but he was surprised how much more than radio he was supposed to learn. Basic navigation, aircraft identification, gunnery, oxygen mask systems, generators. And radios, too—more intimately than even he could have imagined. By the end of training Wayne could assemble an aircraft radio by feel in a pitch-black room.

He’d been promoted to sergeant—all bomber crew were sergeant or higher so they’d be

treated better if they were captured—and assigned to a B-17 crew under Captain Logan at Maxwell Field, Alabama. When the crew found out his hobby was shortwave radio, Wayne was Shorty from then on. When they found out he could draw, Captain Logan asked him to do the nose art for their new bomber, which he was calling Voice of America. Shorty painted a towering Uncle Sam shouting bombs through a megaphone at a cowering Hitler.

And now here he was, on the other side of the Atlantic, and Captain Logan had been killed by flak over Cologne, and Shorty was painting a new bird for a different pilot. Life worked out funny, when it worked out at all.

Shorty finished the black lines and stepped up a rung on the folding ladder and set a hand on the hull. He worked on the face again, adding contour and highlights, color to the cheeks.

“Hey, Shorty,” a voice behind him called in a thick New Jersey accent. “How come you didn’t make that little number look like Francis’ sister?” Then a long low whistle, and a few laughs from below.

Shorty turned to see Lieutenant Broben sitting on the Number Two engine cowling. The copilot lit a Lucky and gestured with it. “That girl’s a blue-plate special.”

“Aw, jeez, lieutenant,” said Francis, whom Broben had instantly dubbed “Saint Francis” because he was pure as angel piss. “I don’t even have a sister.”

“Whose picture were you showing these deprived apes the other day?” Broben demanded. “Your Sunday School teacher?”

Francis colored. He shaved once a month and had lied about his age when he’d joined up, and if anyone was going to get out of this war still a virgin, it was him. “Gosh,” he said, “that was my mom. She does teach Sunday School, though.”

“That dame was your mother?” Broben looked up at the clouds. “I wouldn’t show these saps a picture of my great grandma. They get worked up when they see an overstuffed couch.”

“You should make her look like Francis’ mom,” Plavitz called up. “It’s good luck to have the mother of a saint on your bomber.”

The others laughed.

“The captain was pretty definite what he wanted her to look like,” Shorty said.

In fact, over beer in the Boiler Room the other night Captain Farley had gone into great detail about the girl he wanted on their bomber, nodding more and more enthusiastically as Shorty sketched on napkin after napkin, zeroing in on the face the captain wanted. Shorty had wondered why the captain didn’t have a picture if the girl meant so much to him, but you didn’t ask about that stuff. Whoever she was, Shorty wanted to do her justice.

Broben kicked his feet between the prop blades. “You’re gonna be painting her by moonlight if you don’t hurry up,” he said.

“It’d go a lot quicker if everyone stopped giving me their expert opinion.”

Broben spread his hands. “Everyone’s an expert on dames.”

“Well, you can have her fast, or you can have her good.”

The lieutenant grinned. “Like I said.”

“Why can’t they be both?” asked Garrett.

Broben ignored him. “She’s kinda pale, ain’t she?” he asked.

Shorty didn’t bother to look back at him. “Do I look like Michelangelo to you, lieutenant?”

“Well,” a mild voice said, “you’re painting on top of a ladder and you’re taking orders from God.”

They all turned to see Captain Farley standing with his hands on his hips, his crush cap raked back on his head as he looked up at the nearly finished painting. He wore his A-2 jacket despite the day’s unseasonable warmth. A sergeant stood just behind him, a dark, small man with black eyes.

“What, you got demoted?” Broben asked.

Shorty shifted the brush to his left hand and gave the captain a casual salute, trying to gauge whether he looked approving or disappointed as he took in the artwork.

“I don’t want to rush you, Shorty,” Farley called up. “But I think she’ll be happier if she’s dressed up when we take her to the dance.”

“So we’re definitely going out tomorrow?” Everett asked.

Farley raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know anything you boys don’t. But if the order does come down tonight, it’s a safe bet we’ll be on the roster.”

“If these guys’ll leave me alone I’ll have her done in half an hour, cap,” said Shorty. “This crate’ll fly out with the best nose this side of Durante.”

Farley smiled. “That’s what I want to hear.” He glanced back at the new sergeant and waved him forward. “Gentlemen, this is Sergeant Proud Horse. He’s our new ball gunner.”

“Proud Horse?” Broben went to the trailing edge of the wing and slid off. He landed on the concrete with surprising grace for a man of his girth. “What kinda name is that?”

“Lakota,” said the sergeant.

Broben cocked his head. Beside him Plavitz juggled the baseball in his hand. “Beats me,” he told Broben.

Proud Horse nodded to himself. “Indian,” he tried again.

“Well, why didn’t you say so in the first place?” drawled Wen. He spat tobacco juice and held up a palm. “How, Chief.”

The new man looked the flight engineer up and down.

Beside Wen, Everett put his hands on his hips. “You left your teepee to come all the way

to England and shoot Germans?”

Proud Horse looked at him without expression. Then he pounded a fist against his chest. “Me heap big plains injun,” he said. “Fly heap big planes. Droppum bomb, make-um smoke.” He looked up and opened his hands to the sky. “Send Nazi devils to happy hunting ground.”

Everett stared. Proud Horse kept looking up.

Shorty started laughing, and the crew took it up until they were whooping. Broben grinned and stepped toward the new crew member. “This circus needs all the clowns it can get,” he said. He held out a hand. “Welcome aboard, sergeant.”

The new guy may have been small, but he had a hell of a grip. “Thank you, lieutenant.”

“Jerry Broben.” Broben leaned in and lowered his voice. “There an Indian word for your name?” he asked.

Proud Horse looked up at him and shrugged a shoulder. He really was a little guy, about as close to 4-F as you could get and still qualify. “My first name’s Martin, if that helps.”

“Martin?” Broben shook his head. “Never mind. This bunch’ll hand you a nickname in about two minutes anyways. Like it or not.”

“I’m used to that.”

“I guess so.”

“Hey, chief,” called Garrett. “They play ball out there on the reservation? You know, baseball?” He mimed swinging a bat.

“Some,” Martin admitted.

“Well, don’t worry, we’ll show ya. First we gotta get you a glove.” Garrett held up his own and flexed it. “See?”

“Mine’s back at—”

“Hey, Shorty!” Garrett called up. “Loan Geronimo here your glove, will you?”

Shorty pointed with his brush. “It’s by the wheel chock there.”

Garrett fetched the wellworn fielder’s glove and held it out to Martin. “Your hand goes in this end, chief.”

Martin put on the glove and stood looking at it. Captain Farley looked as if he were about to say something but changed his mind. Martin glanced at him, and Farley gave back a little smile and nodded. “Have fun, sergeant,” he said. “That’s an order.”

Martin saluted with the glove. “Yes, sir.”

Garrett jogged backward along the taxiway, away from the row of heavy bombers parked facing him. He nodded at Plavitz, and the navigator underhanded the baseball to Martin, who caught it in the trap and stood looking at Garrett.

The burly waist-gunner held his glove in front of his chest. “All right, Geronimo.” He punched the glove, then flapped it. “Put her anywhere around here, got it? Just pretend you’re

throwing a tomahawk.”

Up on his ladder Shorty shook his head. Being the new guy was hard enough without being the new guy and an Indian.

He bent and mixed up more flesh pink and was just stretching up to start on the face when a loud pop! nearly startled him from the ladder. It had sounded like a rifle shot. Garrett yelled and Everett hooted. Shorty turned as quickly as he could high up on the ladder and saw Garrett wringing his hand like he was trying to flick off snot. His glove and the baseball lay in the grass beside him.

“God damn it,” said Garrett.

Everett put his hands on his knees and cackled. Wen laughed and slapped himself on the leg with his grimy cap. Broben grinned like someone had told a dirty joke, and even Boney smiled there behind his great stinking bulldog briar pipe as he sat in the shade of the wing. The captain folded his arms and tried to look above it all. He almost succeeded.

Martin remained in his follow-through, waiting to see what Garrett was going to do.

The big man turned his hand in front of his face as if puzzled that there was no blood. “I think you broke it,” he said. “Son of a bitch feels like wood.”

Martin straightened up and pointed to the trap on his glove. “It hurts less if you catch it here.”

“Screw you.”

“And the Proud Horse I rode in on,” Martin agreed.

Everybody laughed harder, and Broben applauded slowly.

“Sergeant Horse was a pitcher for the American Legion team in Rapid City,” said Farley.

“Post Twenty-Two, South Dakota state champs,” said Martin.

“This just keeps getting better,” said Broben. “You have a nickname when you played?”

Martin looked embarrassed. “They, uh, called me Red Man. Because I chewed tobacco.”

“Good thing he didn’t like Beechnut,” Shorty chimed in from on high.

Everett chortled. “Hear that, Gus? Geronimo here’s called Red Man.”

“I don’t give a shit if he’s called General Jesus Roosevelt,” said Garrett. “He nearly gimped my goddamn hand.”

“You do all your pulling with the other one anyway,” said Everett.

“Only when he sees an overstuffed couch,” added Plavitz. He drummed a rimshot on the hull.

Shorty turned back to the riveted metal looming above him. Any other day he’d be in the middle of the fun, cracking jokes and doing voices and pulling faces. But tomorrow the aluminum he was painting would carry him across the English Channel or the North Sea in subzero temperatures, possibly through storms and definitely through enemy territory. It was

thinner than the steel of a beer can, and it was all the shield he'd have between himself and fighter planes and anti-aircraft shells. That shield would bear his artwork, and it had to be right.

Shorty came off like a goofball, but he was dead serious about his work. He was barely aware of what he was doing as he dipped a trim brush, borrowed from Corporal Brinkman, into half a beer can and pulled on the soft slick bristle and finished up the figure's face, adding shades and highlights.

Finally Shorty gathered up his paint cans and climbed carefully from the ladder. He set down the cans and moved the ladder aside and stepped back and looked up at her. Only dimly aware of his sore neck and aching back. The jibes and throws tossed all around him sounded underwater. There was just the parked bomber, angled as if already climbing in the air, the two small windows at the navigator's station in the nose, the painted figure prone beneath. The setting sun cast magic-hour light across the airfield.

He became aware that someone was standing beside him and he glanced at the captain. Farley wasn't smiling, he wasn't frowning. Shorty couldn't have said what the expression on his face was. Recognition, maybe. A man who saw some long-held notion given shape at last.

"Oh," said Farley. "Oh, she—she's fine, Shorty. Really fine. Just the way I pictured." Reluctantly he looked away from the painting. "You've outdone yourself on this one."

"Sir." Shorty saluted.

Garrett's wolf whistle broke the moment. "She can wave my wand any time she wants," he said.

"A little respect, huh?" said Broben. "That's a lady you're talking about."

The ten of them were gathered around the front of the bomber now. Captain, copilot, navigator, bombardier, flight engineer. Left and right waist gunners, tail gunner, belly gunner. And Shorty the radio operator, who glanced among their faces, looking for frowns, knitted brows, cocked heads. He didn't find any. Even the new guy was looking on in open admiration, though he couldn't have fully appreciated what he was seeing.

The painting on the nose of the Flying Fortress showed a sorceress. Not a witch, not a hag. A long, slim, pale-skinned woman in a skintight navy-blue leotard. Long black hair and pale green eyes. She was posed like the figurehead on an old sailing ship, or the hood ornament on a Cadillac. Nearly prone, back arched, one arm back and one outstretched and raven hair windswept. As if diving through the water or the air. Long pale legs, one bent at the knee. A gauzy blue cape flowed from her shoulders. A black wand in her outstretched hand pointed toward the .50-cal cheek gun emerging from a clear plexiglas window. She was long and angular and strong, joyous in her flight but determined in her attitude. Her face was stern

and regal and refined. Not a grin but the ghost of a smile. Her clear-eyed gaze was fixed on something beyond the aircraft. Always looking ahead, always flying to meet it.

This was no Betty Grable in a bathing suit. No girlish Vargas pinup. This was a da Vinci angel ethereal in metal, a Waterhouse nymph resplendent in flight. Beautiful and refined, magical and eerie and not quite of this earth.

In the background floated isolated clouds. Some of them looked oddly solid, like granite, and at least one looked suspiciously like a medieval castle.

The lettering beneath the flying woman was shadowed script, almost a signature. *Fata Morgana*.

The men were quiet, looking at her. Shorty realized that he had never once seen his crewmates together and quiet, except at mission briefings right before wheels-up. It made him nervous.

Then Garrett said, "Still needs bigger tits."

Lieutenant Broben took off his hat and rubbed his brush cut and sighed. He put an arm around Shorty and stood looking at the painting. "I apologize, ma'am," Broben told the flying figure. "An angel could play the violin, and some guys would only hear a horse's tail sawing on a piece of catgut."

"Well what else is it?" asked Garrett.

Broben dropped his arm from Shorty and turned to Farley. "I got an idea," he said. "Tomorrow, let's just drop Garrett on Germany. The Nazis'll be finished in a week."

"I think it'd violate the Geneva Convention," said Farley. "There are some things you just can't do in a war. Even to Nazis."

Broben sighed. "Bombs it is, then."

"Like civilized men," Farley agreed.

Martin shook his head. "I can't keep up with you guys," he said.

Boney pointed the stem of his pipe at the bomber. "Keep up in there," he said.

Martin looked at the bombardier. Tall and skinny and very pale. Gaunt face impassive behind his fuming pipe. It was the first thing the man had said since Martin had arrived.

"Boney talks like he bombs," Shorty told him. "He doesn't drop one till he's sure it's gonna hit."

Martin pointed to the lettering. "Fata Morgana?" he asked.

"Fay-tuh Mor-gon-uh," Shorty corrected.

"What's it mean?"

"Tell him what it means, Joseph," said Broben.

"Yeah, tell him, cap," said Garrett. "I want to hear it again, too."

"Maybe it'll sink in this time," said Everett.

Garrett punched him on the shoulder.

“All right,” said Farley. He looked around self-consciously at his attentive crew, then nodded at his new belly gunner. “Fata morganas are a kind of mirage,” he said. “You see them under certain conditions in calm weather, when a layer of warm air sits on top of a layer of cold air. It acts like a lens. Sometimes they look like floating rocks just above the horizon.” Farley paused. “Or castles in the air.”

Broben waggled his eyebrows. “Castles,” he said. “In the air.”

“Say,” Shorty said in his best radio announcer voice, “you mean like a . . . flying fortress?”

“Why, yes, sergeant, I mean exactly like a Flying Fortress. Clever, no?”

“But why not call her Mirage?” asked Martin. “Everyone knows what a mirage is.”

“A fata morgana’s a special kind of mirage,” said Captain Farley. “Technically, it’s a complex superior mirage.”

“Ooh, you got the fancy flight school,” said Broben.

“The one for smart pilots,” Farley agreed.

“So where does the girl with the magic wand come in?” Martin persisted.

“She’s a girl,” said Everett. “You need a reason?”

“Morgan la Fay was a sorceress in King Arthur,” said Farley. “She was Arthur’s half sister.”

Broben hooked a thumb at Farley. “College boy,” he explained. He mimed drinking tea with his pinky extended. “Lih-tra-choor, dontchoo know.”

Farley nodded at the painting. “The Italians called her Fata Morgana. They named the mirages after her because they thought they were magic. Floating islands or castles that lured sailors to their death. Like the Sirens.”

“Yeah, the air-raid sirens,” said Garrett.

Martin squinted at the woman on the bomber. “So . . . she’s a sorceress . . . and a flying fortress . . . and a mirage?”

Farley nodded. “You’ve got it.”

Martin looked thoughtful as he rubbed near the hollow of his throat. His intensity made the men glance among themselves, but they said nothing. “The Lakota have Heyoka Winyan,” said Martin. “Thunder-Dreaming Woman. She carries lightning, and she’s a great healer. She speaks in a voice like thunder.”

“Well, this dame’s gonna yell all over Germany when we take her up,” said Broben.

“Fata Morgana,” Martin said again.

Shorty nodded. “We weren’t all that nuts about it at first,” he said. He ducked his head apologetically at Farley. “But after the captain explained it, it was kind of hard to picture calling her anything else.”

Martin nodded. "Names have power," he said. He became aware that they were all looking at him and he spread his hands. "Hey, you don't need my okay," he protested. "I'm the new guy."

"Tomorrow's our first time with her, too," said Boney.

"She'll be a good ol girl," said Wen.

"Lady," Broben countered.

Garrett shrugged. "Girl, lady. I'm still gonna see how far I can get with her and still be friends."

Broben shook his head. "Sergeant Garrett," he said, "you're a hell of gunner. But you are one hundred percent barbarian."

Whatever Garrett replied was drowned out by the crew's laughter.

Advance Praise for *Fata Morgana*

“Action, adventure, cool speculative events, well-drawn characters, and an ending that sticks the landing: *Fata Morgana* pushes all my happy buttons.”

—*John Scalzi, New York Times bestselling author of Old Man’s War*

“So gripping and real it felt as if it were logged just minutes after landing. *Fata Morgana* is squarely in the ranks of the most classic and ingenious science fiction — a masterwork of purest cinema, relentlessly charming and inventive to the end.”

—*Chris Sanders, director of Lilo & Stitch and How to Train Your Dragon*

“A rip-roaring adventure full of heart, duty, and sacrifice, *Fata Morgana* is a perfect combination of historical-novel authenticity and space-opera splendor. I couldn’t put it down, and the ending made me cry.”

—*Brooke Johnson, author of the Chroniker City series*

“Amazingly true to history, incredibly human, and expertly told.”

—*Joe Zieja, author of Mechanical Failure*

“Genre-bending, epic, and wholly original: An unexpected, fascinating page-turner.”

—*Lee Kelly, author of A Criminal Magic and City of Savages*

“The twists, turns, and adrenaline never stop flowing in *Fata Morgana*. You will be transported to another world in more ways than one. Easily one of the hardest-hitting science fiction books of 2017!”

—*Nicholas Sansbury Smith, bestselling author of Hell Divers*

From Goodreads:

★★★★★

Normally a nonfiction reader, I was unexpectedly unable to put this book down. The reader is thrust into the story of an American bomber crew—a part of the story that is sure to thrill every WW2 history fan—and then taken on an unexpected journey into another world. Part detailed history, part science fiction, it is a refreshing exploration of the impact of history on individuals and individuals upon history. If you like WW2 aviation, historical fiction and/or science fiction you will love this book!

—*WW2 Reads*

★★★★★

Fata Morgana is a classic WWII Air Force drama juxtaposed with epic science fiction, and it works! The WWII action is so well-researched you can't help but get caught up in the surrealness of the violence of war. The technical aspects are astounding. The constant banter between characters, even during life-threatening moments, feels authentic as well: "*Let's go boys,*" [Broben] called out over the interphone. "*Those Nazis aren't going to bomb themselves.*"

You can't help but feel astounded at the scenarios these young men found themselves in! Details about their flight conditions into battle seem absolutely barbaric in our present-day.

Whatever boyhood they had carried with them into service had been shot, shaken, blasted, burned, belly-landed, and grieved completely out of them.

Boyett and Mitchrone don't pussyfoot around common prejudices of the day, but turn it back on the hardened WWII pilots when Martin Proud Horse joins the crew, and we 21st Century readers can enjoy the "good ol' boys" being put in their place. Had this been written in the '40s or '50s the character Wennnda would most likely have been a damsel in distress. Instead, Boyett and Mitchrone write her as a powerhouse warrior, and she is an awesome force to be reckoned with!

This was a great, jaw-dropping yarn, and one I would recommend to someone with a penchant for realistic WWII reenactments, as well as enjoying adventure alongside ten men from the 1940's being dropped into a whole other world, using their scruples and comradeship to survive.

—*Spinning Jenny's Book Blog*

★★★★★

A fascinating melange of WWII "aviation lit" and hard sci-fi, with a side of metaphysics and fantasy, *Fata Morgana* is a unique book. The planes and fight scenes are described in loving, exquisite detail. These scenes made my palms sweat, but they are masterfully executed. The crew are charmingly vintage, and the plot is full of unexpected high-speed maneuvers, so that I honestly had no idea how it would end, right up to the conclusion. History buffs as well as hard sci-fi fans are likely to get a tremendous kick out of this book!

—*E.P.*

From NetGalley:

★★★★★

The title of this book piqued my interest, as I knew that a fata morgana is a very unusual form of a mirage, and could not see how this definition went with the description of the book. As I read, I realized that it was so aptly titled! Not being a war buff I was concerned that this would take away my interest, but I can only say what a magnificent book this turned out to be! Describing the story as “surprising” hardly does it justice.

The book is essentially a love story that flows so well over the years, beginning in WWII, going to sci-fi, and culminating with a major twist that the reader does not expect. It is a very accurate portrayal of the period, and the sci-fi section is certainly believable. I would certainly recommend this book to other readers for its stylistic approach and wide interest base.

—*Sandra M*

★★★★★

I thought this was going to be a World War II novel, but it surprised me by morphing into a science fiction adventure. This was enjoyable, as the author did not try to explain it all with quantum theory, string theory, or other stuff, but concentrated on the main characters' responses to the experience. I found this technique interesting and enjoyable. Would like to find more of this type!

—*Dale M*

★★★★★

My grandfather was a gunner on a B-17. Fata Morgana was on-point with everything that my grandfather had told my son and myself. From what the crews wore, to how the gunners were strapped in, to the shortwave radio operator, to the people who handled the bombs — 100% accurate.

The science fiction aspect of the book was well-written, too. The Fata Morgana is taken into a very bleak future where the remnants of human society are forced to live in two domes in a crater, fighting each other in a war that is as old as the domes themselves.

The B17 crew had to be my favorite characters. The personality of each one comes across the pages and makes you smile. The authors stayed true to how men from that era acted and their views on women and people of nationalities/color. I also like that they all smoked like chimneys. I did like the romance between Captain Farley and Wennda. It was innocent, but it was real and I liked it. There are a couple of twists that took me by surprise. One was big, and it changed how I viewed the world that Wennda lived in.

There was so much action, and at one point I was on the edge of my seat, chanting, “You are going to make it! You are going to make it!” The end was very bittersweet. I have a theory about what happened, but I refuse to ruin the book for people. It is best that you read the book for yourself.

This book will go on my “keep” shelf!

—*Jolie E*

★★★★

In 1943, Joe Farley and his men are on a mission to bomb a corner of East Germany. We are projected into action. We feel the adrenaline that takes hold of the men. We feel that time is pressing, that death is prowling.

From this first, familiar element, the plot slowly slips into something else. Joe and his crew find themselves catapulted into a sort of parallel world where war has raged so long that there are only a handful of people, trying to survive by rationing. The ozone layer has been severely affected, so life on the surface is impossible.

Even though the second part draws on science fiction, I enjoyed seeing how the society in which Joe and his friends arrive is developed. At no time did I feel it was exaggerated. It is plausible, realistic.

The last part moved me most. It plays on several registers, because this is where the action races. The story accelerates the tempo. Action, betrayal, death — nothing is left to chance, and it makes your heart beat faster. In the midst of all this, a romance manages to hatch, and it this alone has managed to make me hope that the end is the one I would like — for here we have an open end to all the interpretations you want. It's frustrating, but at the same time it's perfect.

Fata Morgana falls into several genres. We find elements of dystopia, science fiction, war, romance, action — but the result does not seem rough. On the contrary! It seems classic, but in fact it is not at all. It completely surprised me. You cannot see the twists coming.

—Lesentierdesmots (translated from the French)

About the Authors



Photo by Jon Tucker

[Steven R. Boyett](#)'s novels include the fantasy classic [Ariel](#), *The Architect of Sleep*, [Elegy Beach](#), and [Mortality Bridge](#). He wrote a draft of *Toy Story 2* for Pixar, and created the groundbreaking online music series [Podrunner](#) and [Groovelectric](#).

Boyett has been a professional martial-arts instructor, paper marbler, advertising copywriter, proofreader, writing teacher, website designer and editor, chapbook publisher, composer, and DJ who has played in major cities and Burning Man. He lives in the San Francisco Bay area.



Photo by Jon Tucker

[Ken Mitchrone](#)'s film and television credits include director, head of story, director of photography, and storyboard artist on *Storks*, *The Lego Movie*, *The Ant Bully*, *Toy Story 2*, *Monsters Inc.*, *The Annoying Orange Show*, *Mighty Magiswords*, and more. His comic illustration includes *Ren & Stimpy*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Myth Conceptions*, and creating the influential *Space Ark*.

Mitchrone is an official artist for the Ed “Big Daddy” Roth estate, and official illustrator for the Oakland Athletics and, at one time, the Baltimore Orioles.

Mitchrone has been a professional race-car driver and pinstriper, and restores and runs vintage locomotives. He is currently involved with the restoration of the [Ward Kimball Collection](#) at the Southern California Railway Museum in Perris, CA. He lives and works in the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles.



Photo by Jon Tucker. B-17G *Starduster* courtesy March Field Air Museum

Boyett and Mitchrone have worked together on the animated features *Toy Story 2* and *The Ant Bully*, the comics *Ren & Stimpy* and *Space Ark*, independent animated shorts, and feature screenplays. *Fata Morgana* is their first novel together.

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