

San Francisco Chronicle June 1998

INHUMAN BEINGS

By Jerry Jay Carroll

Ace Books; 256 pp.

With his second novel, the enormously entertaining Jerry Jay Carroll invites us to ask, "How many writers lurk inside this man?" His 1996 debut *Top Dog* was an apocalyptic wedding of Kafka to Tolkien. *Inhuman Beings* is clearly Raymond Chandler meets Rod Serling.

Cop-turned-private-eye Goodwin Armstrong has a right to be jaded. He's \$50,000 behind on support to his ex-wife, and the private eye business in San Francisco is getting leveled by a new kid on the block. In these days when "the heavy lifting gets done by computers," Armstrong is up to date, employing the services of "a whiz kid at Stanford so smart he reads CIA e-mail to unwind." But neither he nor his colleagues can compete with "a kind of Private-Eyes-R-US franchise" called Security Concerns that's moved in from Atlanta.

So when a wealthy local clairvoyant named Princess Dulay walks into the affable cynic's office, he's testy enough to note, "She had chins to spare and wore a flowing neck-to-ankle dress in a pattern that made you think of Willem de Koonig.... The bold scarf tied under her chin represented a rival theory of art." But he's also desperate enough to check out her story, which is nothing less than: "Aliens are on our planet.... They found Earth, a jewel in the void. They were ravished by its beauty. They want our planet."

With spousal support mounting at \$10,000 per month, a job is a job.

Besides, despite the eccentric nature of her claim, evidence quickly suggests that the Princess is no mere flake off the psychic world's upper crust. Other psychics also begin sensing aliens in town, and when the psychics are turning up suddenly and mysteriously dead Armstrong feels "the case had risen to the dignity of mass hysteria." When menacing visitors start knocking at Armstrong's fleabag hotel room, he moves in with Princess Dulay, just before his hotel burns to the ground.

From there, things get more ominous. Television news anchors and city officials show altered personalities as if possessed. Blue lights start flashing around town. Seagulls with bills like stilettos, as if right out of Hitchcock, attack Armstrong at a marina. The Princess's credit card accounts and savings are electronically obliterated, and quickly she's obliterated as well. Soon, the problems of a few local psychics don't amount to a hill of beans. Defense Department satellites get fried. Video cameras follow Armstrong's every move. People on the aliens' trail get zapped right over the phone.

The world as we know it is clearly headed toward its end, and only Armstrong may be able to avert catastrophe. As the body count in his wake continues to swell, though, it seems everyone is after Armstrong, from aliens to the F.B.I.

Just how successfully Carroll blends his mix of comedy and terror will depend on what expectations readers bring to the book. Carroll's widely diverse talents can work against as well as for him. *Top Dog* tried, and managed, to be several books at once, and *Inhuman Beings* tries to be both a wry detective yarn and an epic fantasy. The detective yarn sharply dilutes the suspense, making this novel far more effective in its texture than its plot. Despite the high stakes, Carroll clearly has too much fun using Armstrong's viewpoint and voice to take those stakes all that seriously.

Read in that spirit, this novel will provide great fun for the reader as well. Armstrong proves droll company, noting of a secretary, "She was the plain-Jane type with mouse-colored hair in a bun. Somebody had given her bad advice about eyeglass frames," or stepping into a house and observing, "The mismatched furniture looked like what goes last at garage sales."

When a writer of serious literary gifts--and Carroll leaves little doubt he possesses such gifts--chooses to allow them free rein in a commercial genre, it's a bit like watching Baryshnikov in a disco: an artist at play easily within the compass of his range.

It does, though, make us wonder what Carroll might do if he pushed himself. *Inhuman Beings* feels like watching Mark McGwire take batting practice: lacking full commitment but still well worth the price of a ticket.