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James Blish has, at one time or another, displayed a comprehensive knowledge of just about anything — from the effect of the Heisenberg Principle upon alternate universes to the comparative use of orchestral crescendos in operas by Verdi and Berg. But in no other story that I know has this Pennsylvanian polymath demonstrated such a terrifying insight into the darker reaches of the human soul as in this uncomfortable tale of evil and justice.

# *The Book of Your Life*

by JAMES BLISH

PETRIE MAPES AND THE BOOKSELLER looked over the counter at each other with a suppressed and freezingly cordial hatred. It was practically the only *over-the-counter* transaction which ever passed between the two.

“Browsing?” the bookseller said, acidly.

“This time. You don’t have anything new for me, I suppose.”

“No. Didn’t expect you.”

“Naturally,” Petrie said. “What about that Frank Harris autobiography? It’s been on order now for two months.”

“Not yet,” the bookseller said. “My source was raided. Did you know that the postal inspectors measure this stuff by weight, just like a letter? My outlet was charged with possession of 30 pounds of obscene books. Books by the pound!”

He sat down again behind the

counter, his eyeshade shadowing nearly his whole face. “I’ve a newish Henry Miller here. All about how his mother-in-law —”

“I’ve seen it,” Petrie said shortly. “Synthetic stuff, doesn’t come up to either of the *Tropics*.”

He moved off, touching a book here and there on the cluttered stalls. He did not, of course, expect to find anything of interest on the open shelves. He had not expected to be in the dark little East Side bookstore at all on this specific day. He had come as a last resort, after an afternoon meeting of the National Association of Mystery Publishers, of which he was secretary-treasurer. The meeting had broken up unusually early, leaving him faced with the likelihood that he could drive back to Fire Island in time to have dinner with his wife — a rather hangdog end for a day alone in the

city, a day with a built-in alibi to boot.

He had phoned the only bachelor girl he knew any longer — for that matter he had never known many, for Petrie's youth had been nearly as ascetic as his inner life was vivid — but no one had answered the phone on either try. Though he had not even talked to the girl in over a year, he was surprised to feel a knife of jealousy: doubtless she was being taken to dinner by some unencumbered young man, and then, and then . . .

As always in such moments of rebuff, his mind swung automatically to the world of vicarious experience, where every woman is available. He had learned long ago that he could not bring himself to buy a silk-stockings magazine from a newsstand in the plain sight of the world, and on the few occasions when he had been driven into one or another of the "art"-photograph outlets along Sixth Avenue, he had been driven directly out again by the pressure of other customers around the boxes of cellophane-wrapped stills.

Then, for a year, he had commissioned a needy pulp-writer to turn him out a 10,000-word story a month, which was forwarded to him from the writer's agent in a neat leather binder. The writer's imagination had proven more than lurid enough, and the whole arrangement preserved Petrie's anonymity — but the publishing business was too wob-

bly these days to permit Petrie such an expense any more, and the writer had gone back to science fiction. Something of the same kind had happened to a painter in glazes whom Petrie had employed indirectly for a little while, though he had been less satisfactory: he had been even better than Henny South at envisioning exotic situations, but his knowledge of anatomy had had some woeful gaps in it — for one thing, he had the odd notion that the female skeleton had distinct breastbones.

But there were always books, if one knew where to get them.

Petrie picked up a battered Ellery Queen paperback and looked abstractedly at the cover. It was, of course, a book any citizen could buy openly, and for no more than a quarter. Petrie himself could have come by a copy of the hardbound edition at no cost at all through the NAMP library, but he never did. He liked the smooth Queen style, with its overtones of interest in kinds of literary effect beyond simple violence and suspense, and he liked equally well the cold stimulation of the puzzle Queen posed for the reader just before revealing the solution to the plot. Buying Queen paperbacks in bookstores was, as he knew very well, a ritual directed toward himself, his form of public notice that not all his reading outside of business hours had to nourish that seething jungle of intertwined limbs and ruffled lingerie into which

his dreams plunged him every night. He sometimes wished, too, that mystery publishing could get back to this kind of writing; the currently popular novels of violence stood too firmly in the middle of the spectrum, between Petrie's public taste and his private one, to do more than irritate him. But that, regrettably, was where the money was.

He tucked the plant volume under his arm and looked back at the bookseller. The man's face was still in shadow and he was sitting quite still in the pool of light, reminding Petrie, as always, of the old man in Stevenson's "Markheim" and, too, of the old woman killed by Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Only the analogues kept Petrie in control of himself under the bookseller's unarguable, unwavering, incessant scrutiny. Had he been forced to think of the bookseller as a real person, actually looking this fixedly into the real Petrie Mapes, he could never have stopped himself from repeating as well those two fictional killings.

As it was, he approached the counter almost cheerfully, relieved to have found something to buy after all, and abruptly anxious to leave. The bookseller looked up at him, the green shadow lifting like a curtain, but failing to reach his eyes.

"I'll tell you what," the man said, in an odd tone of voice. "I've got something for you after all. Didn't want to sell it, but it's get-

ting too big to keep around here. It's just your kind of thing."

What did the man really know about his kind of thing? But he did know. He knew more than enough.

"What is it?" Petrie said.

"Over here. The big book on the lectern."

Petrie looked at it. It was more than big; it was monstrous. He had noticed it earlier, but had taken it for an old unabridged dictionary. Now he saw that it was much too big even for that.

An oversize book attracts attention even in a large library. Furthermore, in the field of erotica a big book means a plethora of illustrations — and even an incurious, nearly illiterate person like Janet Mapes could recognize such a book merely by opening it at random.

"Sorry, no picturebooks," Petrie said indifferently. "I prefer my own imagination."

"Not so much as a woodcut in this thing. It's solid text. And this is the only copy in the world."

"Don't give me that. Next you'll be trying to sell me the Fourth and Fifth Books of Moses, in his own handwriting."

"Not you," the bookseller said, looking at Petrie sidelong. "I've never tried to sell you a *Necronomicon* or a *Pornoboscodidascolo* or any other fake. This is *The Book of Your Life*, the real thing. I've tried it, and I know."

Probably he did know. The bookseller knew the disease as well as

Petrie did; that was why he and Petrie hated each other. And he, too, knew where the money was.

"I never heard of it. Who wrote it? I've no time for games."

"Try it."

Suspiciously but with hope, Petrie opened the huge volume at random. The type face was Century Old Style, the paper a tough vellum only slightly yellowed; the book, then, could be anywhere from 50 to 400 years old. There seemed to be acres of type on every page, running in four columns, each one of which was as wide as the full width of type in a modern book.

The style, however, should place it as to century. . . . A phrase caught Petrie's eye. He bent closer.

A drop of perspiration, falling from the end of his nose onto the linen-like paper, ticked him back to consciousness again. He was glad he had worn a topcoat. "Is it — is it all like that?" he whispered.

"No. It has something for everybody. That's the funniest thing about it. The book always opens to the place that will hit the reader hardest. I don't know how the author turned the trick, or what the binder did to help. Something to do with the way different types grab hold of a big book, maybe. But it happens."

"That's nonsense."

The bookseller shrugged. "It works. Don't say I didn't warn you, when you find that all the rest of that book's an anticlimax. That's

the way it is. Every man who cracks it, cracks it at the spot that does the most to him. It worked for you, didn't it?"

Petrie, recovering rapidly, felt vaguely pleased that the man's constant watchfulness had resulted in so far afield a judgment. Evidently, having once sold Petrie a copy of *Fantazius Mallare*, the bookseller had decided that Petrie's interests had an occult streak. But that didn't matter.

What mattered was the big book. Nothing Petrie had ever read in his life had affected him so directly as that single passage. The anonymous author of this volume knew things Henny South could not even have dreamed, and had a supernal skill as well. He had filled page 1009 with the purest distillation of lust ever sublimed on paper — and there were thousands more such pages.

"How much?" Petrie said.

"Oh, I'll rent it to you on approval, say a dollar a week. I'll get it back eventually, anyhow. Try it on your friends, you'll have a million laughs. I've tried it on all of mine, or I'd make the price steeper. On all of them but you."

The shadow of the eyeshade made his eyes impossible to see. Mutely, Petrie put a ten-dollar bill on the counter. The bookseller closed the big volume, producing a puff of air with an odd smell of cloves, as if the pages had recently been fumigated. Together, like co-conspirators, they carried the book to Petrie's car.

The last thing Petrie saw as he pulled away from the curb was the bookseller's smile, dim in the shadow of the doorway, like an inverted echo of the eyeshade. With a sudden rush of fellowship, he smiled back.

Janet, as he had confidently anticipated, assumed that the book was a dictionary. She watched him trundle it into his den with an expression of gentle resignation and went back to her fancywork. He knew that she would never inquire about it again.

There had been a time when he had hoped that Janet would be able to bail him out of the jungle. She had been, and was still, an exquisite ivory-colored girl, long-legged, delicately formed, with smoky eyes and a soft voice which rose and fell as she spoke, almost like singing, almost like Greek declamation, yet too subtly inflected for either; and, almost incidentally, her mind was most penetrating and direct. For a while he had been able to submerge his private hell at least partially in her physical beauty and her capacity for response — and he had begun to see hints that she might assuage him completely if he went about it carefully enough. Any direct appeal for help, he was sure, would revolt her and lose him the chance forever, but with care . . .

He was, he had thought, careful. He had always enjoyed reading aloud, when he was sure of the regard of his audience. He began to read to Janet on occasional evenings,

picking first passages in one book and another which he thought she would enjoy, then pages which seemed to strike common chords of emotion between them, and finally edging into fragments which bore — peripherally, to be sure — upon his own agony.

It had been then that she had said, in her sweet, musical voice: "I'm afraid it seems pretty dull to me, Petrie. We're different, that's all. I'm beginning to think you'd rather read about it than do it."

That had been after the Torture-of-the-Senses scene in Hecht's book, a mild enough notion among the many in the cauldron of Petrie's skull, but for her evidently as final as the falling of a portcullis between the den and the rest of the house. Now she would listen to nothing but appalling mush from several of the young poets Petrie sponsored, bending an especial ear over her embroidery-hooks to the vapid sonnets of Cochineal Marsh, while Petrie, falling dizzily back into himself, sat beside the den fire and culled new versions of the old jungle entrapments.

Thus it did not take him long — some six nights of hungry skimming and sudden eager concentration — to find that nothing in *The Book of Your Life* even began to approach the first passage that he had read in the bookstore. Oh, there were enough scenes, scores of them, good enough to give any ordinary novel an under-the-counter reputation

that would last as long as censorship. There were a few that were so elegantly written as to rival the great erotic texts of India and Japan. But there were no more that spoke with such a wild urgency, and such an immediately consequent spasm of pure delight, to Petrie Mapes.

Much of the rest of the book, as a matter of fact, turned out to be gibberish, and some of that was derivative to boot. One section, for instance, was devoted to fragments from *Het Oude Vletle*, a cycle of Walloon folk-tales rather like *Struwwelpeter*, which had been compiled a century ago under the title *Johannes and the Puppet* by Heinrich Schumann, the so-called Scholar of Orange. The tales supposedly strung themselves together into some vaguely allegorical whole, but Schumann had never been able to collect the whole cycle, so that his compilation remained one of the least-interesting hodgepodes in the folk literature. To be sure, the material from the cycle in *The Book of Your Life* had either been missed by Schumann or had been edited out of the orthodox edition, but otherwise it was unremarkable. It was certainly far less exotic than two thirds of the tales Schumann had found and transcribed.

After a week, Petrie was forced to admit the truth. Nonsense or no, the book had indeed opened for Petrie at its highest point of interest for him. Much of the rest of it was remarkable, but also distinctly anti-

climactic to that transcendently erotic passage on page 1009. The bookseller had been right. No wonder he had been so certain that he would get the book back from Petrie sooner or later.

This much was proven. With a more abstract curiosity, Petrie turned to the beginning of the big book and began to read it straight through, for sense. It was hard to do. The unknown author wrote in many styles, and there was no reason visible why he should change from one to another at any given point. The book as a whole had the complexion of a novel, involving hundreds — no, thousands, several thousands at least — of characters, each one of whom was approached through the style most suitable to his interests and his state of mind. One of the characters was an educated man afflicted with satyriasis, who emerged at the height of his career on page 1009. . . .

Some of the remaining thousands of states of mind were highly abstruse, some childish, some almost impossibly noble, some so perverse as to be sickening even to Petrie — and some were simply insoluble, not only as attitudes but as writing about attitudes. Where the whole volume was leading its ideal reader could not be guessed. It had, Petrie suspected, a master plan, but no plot that any isolated human reader would ever be able to understand, let alone anticipate.

Delight, bafflement and boredom

alternated bewilderingly as he turned the huge pages. One conclusion emerged slowly: The bookseller had been right again. There was something in *The Book of Your Life* for everybody.

He was not ready to admit this too until he struck a chapter which should have appealed as devastatingly to his own private hell as had page 1009, but left him instead as little moved as a glacier. It took him a while to discover that the point of view was wrong. The chapter had all the ingredients, but it had been written for a nymph, not a satyr. Or no: for a desperately timid woman whose desire had never escaped from her mind into the world of action.

#### A female Petrie Mapes.

That was a hard lesson, but Petrie learned it, and thought at once of Helen LeClerc. Helen had once nearly become the woman Petrie had been looking for, but at the last moment she had lost the game, for the same reason that Petrie always lost it. Her verbal promiscuity was a flat sham, a form of compulsive self-torture. The one occasion when Petrie had taken her at face value had been disastrous for both of them. He had hardly spoken to her since, for any kind of failure went down hard with him, but now it appeared that he could pay her back in kind.

It took maneuvering to get her back into the den again, but late one night she arrived. She seemed dis-

posed to resume the role of concupiscent virgin if Petrie would stay in the audience and let her play it by herself. He listened with every evidence of interest to her espousal of nudism — or, as she called it, “naturism” — as the best road back to free, primitive love, and let her fiddle with the ends of her knitted stole without offering to act on anything she said.

She regained confidence rapidly. After a while, crossing her legs for at least the twentieth time, she began to recount as a personal experience something which Petrie recognized as being parroted from a novel by Jack Woodford. She was sure, she said, that it would amuse him.

It did. When she was through, he opened the big book, and read back to her, beginning on page 449. Shortly after he turned the page she got up and walked unsteadily to the bathroom. When she came back, she was blue to the lips, but she would not leave until he had finished reading the whole passage. Then she tottered out through the darkened house without a word.

Three days later, she had begun her novitiate at the Convent of the Immaculate Conception — and Petrie had found out what the big book was for.

*The Book of Your Life* was an instrument of destruction. It had been Oscar Wilde, Petrie remembered, who had observed that the main danger in a wish is that it might be granted. The big book was

the ultimate distillation of that proposition. It granted, it fulfilled, it gratified, it fed — and it destroyed. The reason why the bookseller had turned it over to Petrie seemed all too clear.

To test the hypothesis, Petrie tried next the book's mathematical section, not one single line of which meant anything to him. He invited Archibald Smith to the den, not out of any special malice toward Archie, whose confidence in the world around him was hardly more than annoying, but simply because Archie was the only man Petrie knew who might understand Page 202.

He seemed to understand it well enough. Despite his usual affability, and the black Munich beer Petrie had provided, his face froze as Petrie read out the third of the series of expressions, and remained that way for the rest of the evening. It was still frozen the next night, Petrie heard, when Archie's wife found him slumped in a tub full of warm, sticky, bronze-colored water.

It was on that same day that Petrie found the passage that would destroy Janet Mapes.

To Petrie the entire passage — another of those interminable tales from *Het Oude Vleitje*, right down to a perfect imitation of Schumann's windy, pseudo-archaic translationese — could hardly have been duller, but all the same he recognized it for what it was without difficulty. The portrait of the imprisoned Mar-

garetha, of the challenge of Antony the Puppet to the castle with its secret rooms, the description of King Jan immersed in filling his throne-room with petrified bric-a-brac that had once been living people — it was all clear enough, even down to the pun on Petrie's own name, with its many-level reference to his researches with the Book, his habit of seeing people as literary characters, and the stone walls which had closed in his life.

Quite clearly, Janet and young Marsh had become lovers. He had only to read the passage to them to accomplish the rest. Guilt would destroy the poet, immediately and almost as a matter of course, for Marsh was already consumed with the fear that he would never in his life write a good poem — which, to be sure, was true — and on the defensive for having taken so much money from Petrie. To be caught as well in a theft of this order from Petrie would push him over the brink in short order.

As for Janet — *The Book* was explicit about her, even through the fog of allegory and the smog of the Schumannnesque style. For her, the trail out of Petrie Mapes' house led with shocking directness to a private hell Petrie himself had never dared even to approach: *heroin*. The dream into which Margaretha disappeared at the end of the tale could admit no other interpretation.

Nevertheless, with the double-bladed weapon in his hand, Petrie

held back. Now that he knew the facts, he wanted nothing better than to bring them both into the den and demonstrate to them how dangerous a man a bibliophile could be — but with the power to do just that available at his pleasure, he hesitated.

It had suddenly occurred to him to be afraid for himself.

Why, after all, had he not been destroyed by page 1009? He had read it repeatedly since he had brought the book home, first for its physical effect, and now out of bravado; but he survived. He had seen himself on that page, but had felt no more revulsion than he could call forth from any mirror. He had always known, after all, that he was a sick and despicable human being — competent, intelligent, diligent, successful, ruthless, fearful, cruel, sex-ridden, self-centered, and essentially dead except in the life he borrowed from books. Had this gruesomely detailed self-knowledge protected him from the flash of ultimate self-loathing which had destroyed Helen and Archie, and which would assuredly destroy Janet and Marsh if Petrie were to let it loose? Did the difference lie in delusion — that Helen and Archie and Janet and Marsh were still struggling blindly to think of themselves as "good"?

Or did *The Book of Your Life* have some death more subtle, more just, and more detailed in store for Petrie Mapes?

Obviously the bookseller had thought so; and probably he knew what it was. It had come down, at long last, to a contest between the two of them, as Petrie sometimes had dreamed that it would.

Grimly, Petrie set out to win it. He was nearly sure that he held several aces. To begin with, the bookseller could not have known him well enough to judge his intelligence accurately. It had to be granted that the bookseller knew the disease, and knew the obstacles to any cure: the conviction that such obsessions are inadmissible to anyone, especially to those who love you; the indefeasible facility at dodging the help you need most; the rewards, which make you more willing to satisfy the disease than suffer the cure; the fear that cure would make another person of you, and the love for the person, diseased or sane, that you have come to think you are . . .

But he did not know Petrie Mapes, and in particular he did not know Petrie *plus* the disease, which added up to a distinct and unique entity. Not even Janet had been able to penetrate to that entity; her very nearly deadly remark — "You'd rather read about it than do it" — had failed to kill because, although she knew Petrie, she did not know the disease: satyriasis is a form of infantilism, arising not out of an abhorrence toward the act of love, but an inability to outgrow the realization that the pleasure in

the act is vastly over-advertised — an inability to accept the thing as it is as a replacement for adolescent previsions of it. A passion for pornography is not a substitute, but a different thing entirely, though equally unsatisfactory . . . a special case of the permanent disappointment which makes artists of some people, and libertines of others.

All this Petrie knew well; that was his first ace.

As for *The Book of Your Life* itself, Petrie already knew that it was not a killer, but only a weapon. Once you knew how to use it, you could, if you liked, choose *not* to use it — as Petrie himself was holding back the destruction of Janet and Marsh. This might in itself be the key to avoiding the self-destruction which the disease so powerfully urged upon its victims, the self-destruction toward which the Book seemed designed to propel its readers at the flick of a page. Hold back; wait; deny yourself. Impossible advice for an addict of any kind — the whole failure of the Puritan ethos was the failure to recognize that fact. But Petrie was prepared to try it.

Unlike most addicts, he had certain advantages. He had a source of supply — dilute, to be sure, but unfailing. In addition to the books for the sick man, there was Janet for the well man, and Janet remained the only woman in the world who was actually available to him. She would remain so, as long

as Petrie chose to hold back his weapon; she might even be pleased at a renewal of interest. As for Marsh — well, if Marsh was necessary to keep Petrie alive, then Marsh would have immunity too. After all, he had only found in one place what Petrie had been seeking on every streetcorner.

Hold back; wait; deny yourself; tolerate; patronize; admire; and, if possible, learn to love. But above all, *have patience*.

And finish *The Book*. He was near the end now, and just beginning to feel a shadow of that excitement he had felt as a child, when he had asked to be allowed to read “just to the end of the chapter” before going to bed.

### CHALLENGE TO THE READER

*You have read The Book of Your Life. What is to follow should take only a few pages; every clue you need to contrive your own ending is already known to you, if you have read carefully.*

*To read The Book is a privilege. If you have understood it, you are free from this point on; and the Author salutes you as a master spirit.*

*To understand The Book is a duty. If you have failed to arrive at any of the nine hundred and ninety-nine permissible solutions to the plot by the time you reach this page, the Author welcomes you to his Cast of Characters.*

*Success to you; for if you fail, you will greatly complicate The Book;*

*but if you succeed, you will simplify it for the next reader, because you were well-imagined.*

*Think carefully before you turn the page. If you do not, The Book will devour you utterly.*

The lectern creaked. The bookseller did not turn. He had heard *The Book* return home often enough before; and he knew well enough the name of the new character in it. He could even estimate closely how many pages longer *The Book* would have to be to encompass Petrie

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Mapes as an essential part of the plot.

The bookseller shrugged and pulled his eyeshade lower over the smoke-filled sockets. This was, he had to admit, a very bad way to write a book.

But until the voraciousness of this one was satisfied, he could hardly afford to begin another. *The Book* had a life of its own; and, as usual, nobody could have been more surprised than the Author.

But he had to admit that it was selling very well.